

Oakland Ballet's spring season springs to life under Graham Lustig's guidance

By Allan Ulrich | June 1, 2018 | Updated: June 1, 2018 12:32pm



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Photo: John Heffl

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Landes Dixon, Sharon Kung, Coral Martin, Nina Pearlman and Adonis Martin in Ramona Kelley and Vincent Chavez's "La Llorona," part of Oakland Ballet's 2018 spring season.

Most ballet audiences love a good story graphically told, but not all choreographers can spin a yarn successfully. That gift requires both instinct and training. So, bravo to Oakland Ballet Artistic Director Graham Lustig, who planned his company's spring season around the art of the narrative. No fewer than six premieres by local dance makers filled the schedule Thursday, May 31, at Laney College's Odell Johnson Performing Arts Center.

This is a real challenge for this 12-dancer company. Economy counts, and so does ingenuity, given that decor is limited for this run. If one test for a narrative ballet is the ability to comprehend the story without program notes (which were provided in this case), then Danielle Rowe's "Itchy Bot Bot (A Family Portrait)" merits much praise.

This work concerns intergenerational spats in a close-knit family, and Rowe succinctly characterizes her quartet through gesture. Ramona Kelley's knock-kneed, pigeon-toed solo testified to the girl's awkwardness. On the other side of the stage, Landes Dixon's bouncy extensions (and graduation outfit) suggest great confidence in the future. Alton San Giovanni's perky music was the only commissioned score of the evening and it made a difference.

Then, Oakland's ballet master Bat Abbit supplied "The Sound of Snow," the second ballet this spring set to Edith Wharton's bleak novella, "Ethan Frome." The story of forbidden love in the north country hasn't really changed since Cathy Marston's "Snowblind" at San Francisco Ballet in April, but Abbit goes his own way. He dispenses with the corps, limiting the piece to the three protagonists, forever bound together. Abbit coats it all with a layer of irony in his choice of music. Ethan (Christopher Dunn) hoofs it to a Scott Joplin rag. Kelley and Samantha Bell delivered strong performances.

I did not think of the acclaimed deaf dancer Antoine Hunter as a choreographer, but there's nothing embarrassing about his "Giggling Flame and Roaring Waves," which suggests through a gestural vocabulary (as well as American sign language) that absence of hearing need not generate isolation. A full-company work and partially improvised, it will be memorable for a central episode, the stage a forest of waving arms, all set to a Miles Davis record. We penetrate a world few of us know.

Michael Lowe's "Kimono Wednesdays" arrives with a back story about Claude Monet's painting, "La Japonaise," a portrait of the painter's wife, Camille (Emily Kerr) and its restoration to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. There isn't a great deal of dramatic tension in these 12 minutes, but the dancing afforded pleasure and the costumes, wigs and fans provide great eye appeal.

Dancers Kelley and Vincent Chavez flexed their choreographic wings in "La Llorona," a tale of a legendary Mexican Medea. Rather than a narrative, Lustig premiered "Heartbreak Hotel," a nostalgic sock hop set to Elvis Presley and others. This gave us the strongest sustained and most joyful dancing of the evening. The Oakland Ballet is making considerable strides these days. If only the company danced more.

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

MORE INFORMATION

Oakland Ballet Company: Dances by Graham Lustig, Bat Abbit, Antoine Hunter, Danielle Rowe, Vincent Chavez, Ramona Kelley and Michael Lowe. Through Saturday, June 2, at 7:30 p.m. Odell Johnson Performing Arts Center, Laney College, 900 Fallon St., Oakland. Tickets, \$35-\$50. www.oaklandballet.org

