

Swan Lake Samba Girl

Tonya's dance blog, where she muses about Ballet, Ballroom, and the trials and tribulations of being a skinny white girl learning Latin...

August 15, 2009

A SHORT NOTE ON ARTISTIC DIRECTORS AND PROGRAM SELECTIONS



Photo of Pilobolus's *Darkness and Light* by Ruby Washington, taken from NYTimes.

In light of the recent downpour of Tulsa Ballet reviews, many of which criticized the selection of dances artistic director Marcello Angelini chose to bring to NY, my friend Christopher Atamian writes a note on programming selection. Chris also talks about Pilobolus, who were recently at the Joyce and big shame on me for missing them (I was recovering from an insanely exciting ballet season — the best EVER in my NY lifetime— and hystericizing over putting the finishing touches on my novel, so please forgive me for failing to cover this most exciting troupe).

I think Chris makes good points about not only the selection of programs but the placement of dances within the programs. I think this is one thing that Judith Jamison of Alvin Ailey is genius at: that company always performs their choreographically richest, most upbeat piece at the end: either Ailey masterpiece *Revelations*, the versatile hip hop / modern / African combo *Love Stories*, or Tharp's wild-ride, *The Golden Section*. And interestingly, now that I think about it, New York City Ballet usually puts their premieres in the middle of the program, ending with a Balanchine. I definitely think you'd want to put the less established pieces in the middle, and bookend them with the tried and true. I do wonder if we "cranky New Yorkers" in Apollinaire Scherr's words would have received Tulsa's program better had Hue's piece been in the middle or the beginning and the Duato at the end.

Anyway, here is Chris Atamian:

It is presumably the role of the artistic director to choose the particular program or set of dances that a company will perform on any given night. I don't know if anyone else has noticed a rather curious phenomenon, but I have attended a few performances of late by some truly fine companies that would have benefited enormously from a more judicious dance selection. There was of course the Tulsa Ballet's amazing 1-2 MacMillan-Duato punch at the Joyce which was unfortunately followed by a much weaker *This Is Your Life* by Young Soon Hue. Why not start with the Hue piece-if one must include it- and then work up to the Macmillan and Duato? The audience would then walk away with an even stronger impression of this wonderful company.

The week before, I attended all three Pilobolus programs, also at the Joyce. Program One began with a fine martial arts/capoeira-inspired piece *Redline* choreographed by Jonathan Wolken. This was followed by a stunning piece *Darkness and Light* developed in collaboration with the truly astounding puppeteer Basil Twist involving shadow play and a presentation of nothing less than the cosmos itself, whirring by at breakneck speed in front of a mesmerized audience. Then after a short break, the company came back with the 1971 work *Walklyndon*, a cute, short piece which involves the company dancers walking back and forth across the stage and engaging in some wonderfully humorous gags and movement with elements of clowning, physical humor and even a touch of vaudeville perhaps. The members wear hilarious, lively costumes.

I compared the piece elsewhere to a jived up version of Romper Room and I meant that in the best way: it's humorous and soulful and it gives the audience a good idea of the company's history and evolution-how else will younger people ever see the early pieces of a company which has now thrived for close to forty years? My beef is that it came as a complete anticlimax after the Basil Twist piece-you could literally feel the audience deflate: they were waiting for something stellar, fast-paced and acrobatic and instead were presented with a funny and somewhat tame *amuse-gueule*. (Of course a company that specializes in say baroque dance or a classical ballet company may have an easier time of things programming an evening of performances simply because they have a theoretically more restrained group of works to choose from than a contemporary company...) There are of course many ways to curate a night of performances: by similarity or contrast; by choreographer; by time or setting; by pace or style; etc) No one way is correct *per se*, one just wishes that the choices were sometimes more judicious or logical. As with everything in a very difficult field, that is easier said than done and there is always something to be said for experimentation. And of course this is just one critic's opinion...others are free to disagree with me!