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DANCE REVIEW

# Los Angeles Ballet

**L.A. Ballet soloists show sense of purpose, if not peak skills, in season debut.**

By Lewis Segal, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

In the performance of George Balanchine's Gershwin suite "Who Cares?" on Friday at UCLA's Freud Playhouse, you could see Melissa Barak dance the solo to "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise" with her usual technical surety and interpretive flair. But in her own brand-new choreographic essay, "Lost in Transition," this leading dancer in Los Angeles Ballet didn't build a stairway so much as forge a chain: 10 dancers hand in hand across the stage at the beginning of the piece, with lots more lateral link-ups later on.

An example of the company's attempt to supplement its Balanchine-oriented repertory with original pieces by local choreographers, "Lost in Transition" used challenging, string-dominated music by Edgar Meyer in a plotless but often deeply emotional one-act workout for some of L.A. Ballet's most exciting soloists.

Unfortunately, too many sections started with imaginative movement concepts but then retreated to nothing-special, hand-me-down virtuosity. For instance, the trio for Lauren Toole, Kelly Ann Sloan and the charismatic Sergey Kheylik began brilliantly with powerful torso action and a sense of suppressed intensity. But the weight and force of it soon evaporated into a display of classroom steps. Similarly, an intriguing double duet that introduced ideas about troubled relationships suddenly morphed into a formula recapitulation finale.

Aubrey Morgan, Erin Rivera-Brennand, Damien Johnson, Peter Snow and the corps kept you watching, but lost in transition was the courage of Barak's convictions.

Arguably a mite miscast in its central section of solos and duets, the "Who Cares?" production demonstrated anew Colleen Neary's ability to restage Balanchine classics in a way that shows you exactly what each moment is intended to do. You may well have seen better individual performances, but never clearer or more purposeful ones.

In Cuban-born guest artist Eddy Tovar, Neary found someone who could

not only adroitly partner Barak, Morgan and Nancy Ricer, but also solo stylishly. Too bad he didn't also dance "Tarantella," a quasi-Italian Balanchine duet to Gottschalk that needed Tovar's stamina and, alas, left Corina Gill and Rainer Krenstetter looking a bit overtaxed.

Yes, they executed the steps proficiently -- and perhaps that's all we should expect on the first night of a season. But there's an escalating, competitive, can-you-top-this? thrill to the overlapping showpiece solos that should carry the viewer up to bravura heaven. And it never happened Friday. Maybe Gill and Krenstetter should dance "Tarantella" at every performance in every season until it does. That would be a great breakthrough for them and for the L.A. Ballet audience as well.

Cast opposite Snow in the Sanguinic sequence of Balanchine's "The Four Temperaments" (to Hindemith), Gill displayed the speed and sharpness that have made her one of the company's prime assets. Neary's staging inspired excellence from everyone, focusing on the choreographic oddities -- especially the anti-classical gestural eccentricities -- that make the work a modernistic masterpiece.

Kheylik looked perfectly at home in the living sculpture of the Melancholic section, Andrew Brader used his long, long arms impressively in the Phlegmatic episode, and others including Toole, Sloan, Brennan, Barak, Morgan and Johnson offered new evidence of their prowess.

Beginning with a homegrown "Nutcracker" at the end of 2006, Neary and her co-director, Thordal Christensen, have made fine dancing a priority, so their Los Angeles Ballet already eclipses a previous Balanchine-influenced company of the same name. It's a venture that should inspire support from the arts community. But compromises -- fewer performances this season, the reliance on taped music -- make one wonder if the company can count on those balletomanes who've always claimed they'd support a locally based troupe if the quality was there.

Well, it is -- but where are you?