

Review:

Los Angeles Ballet Kicks Off Its Third Season

March 9, 2009/Los Angeles Times
by Laura Bleiberg



Melissa Barak and Eddy Tovar in *Prodigal Son*; Photo: Los Angeles Times

It takes commitment, nerve, and ridiculous sums of money to build a successful ballet company. And that's just the kindling.

To get a real blaze going, it helps to have the high-powered dance connections of Los Angeles Ballet's co-directors, Thordal Christensen and Colleen Neary.

For their fledgling company's third repertory season, launched Saturday at Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center, Christensen and Neary brought out their big-gun friends and family, and there was noticeably more heat onstage.

Colleen's sister Patricia Neary, a former principal dancer with New York City Ballet, staged the George Balanchine-Sergei Prokofiev 1929 masterpiece "Prodigal Son." One of that ballet's greatest interpreters of the title part, Miami City Ballet director Edward Villella, loaned them costumes and sets (modeled on Georges Rouault's originals).

Karin von Aroldingen, another former City Ballet powerhouse, was brought in to help stage "Stravinsky Violin Concerto" (1972), one of Balanchine's neoclassical gems.

Finally, there was a snazzy premiere, "An American Camelot" by Jennifer Backhaus, with party costumes by Franco Martinez and hanging light shades by Tony Kudner.

"Prodigal" requires an oversized acting style of another era, yet the L.A. Ballet dancers managed it and the dance's quirky athleticism flawlessly. This century-old ballet, based on the biblical parable, crackled with freshness.

L.A. Ballet shares Cuban-born leading-man dancer Eddy Tovar with Orlando Ballet, and thank them very much.

Tovar has dark good looks, not to mention that classic, unfussy Cuban technique.

He inscribes beautiful, open shapes with his etched, muscular body. His son took us on a believable journey, leaving home full of insolent bravura and crawling back a repentant, broken man.

Ballerina Melissa Barak, coached also by Westside Ballet's Yvonne Mounsey, came to inhabit the Siren's wily personality more slowly. She had the moves and an exacting style. Barak wrapped the Siren's red cape seductively around her thigh and unfurled her turned-out legs in high sideways kicks and those provocative lunges.

Barak more fully became the temptress in her pas de deux with Tovar. In one pretzel coupling after another, Barak emotionally reeled Tovar in, and when she became his, her raised hand signaled triumph.

The L.A. Ballet men made a notable transformation as the grotesque Drinking Companions. Flopping and rollicking about the stage, they took to this weirdness with all-out freedom.

Backhaus' "An American Camelot" was her second piece for L.A. Ballet. The first work misfired so badly (last season's "she said/he said") that the latest commission came as a surprise. This time, Backhaus and the six couples she cast were on much firmer ground.

"An American Camelot" advocates dancing through your troubles, and Backhaus' loose, hip choreography was persuasive. How can you go wrong with Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie and Eartha Kitt, singing "Bal Petite Bal"? (The night's music was taped.) The choreographer melded jitterbug, jazz and classic steps in six sections.

Male dancers were given virile leaps and push-ups. The women did the Charleston -- never comfortable in toe shoes -- but pointe work too. The tall and loose-limbed Andrew Brader was in his element as leading man.

"Stravinsky Violin Concerto," on the other hand, was occasionally effortful. But the corps de ballet held heads high, and that deer-in-the-headlights expression everyone used to wear has vanished. Hallelujah.

Barak and Peter Snow made a complementary match in the first duet. Paired with Brader in the second duet, Corina Gill was a shining light of newfound strength and complexity. Her continued growth and onstage joy were infectious.

That's the fun of having a local ballet company -- watching it grow and develop. Experience it yourself.

-- Laura Bleiberg