

## DANCE REVIEW

# **Out of many, one Los Angeles Ballet The new company's diverse dancers form a robust whole in a program of Balanchine and Bournonville.**

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Los Angeles Ballet's diverse program forms a robust whole. It's hard enough for dancers trained in different styles of ballet — sometimes in different countries — to form a unified ensemble. It's harder still to display that unity in the distinctive dance languages of two choreographic masters.

Born just four months ago, Los Angeles Ballet passed that test in its first repertory program Thursday at UCLA's Freud Playhouse — maybe not perfectly, maybe not without a pervasive sense of effort, but splendidly enough to make three challenging pieces come alive for a large, enthusiastic audience.

Classical Balanchine, contemporary Balanchine and buoyant, Romantic Bournonville all received scrupulous performances in stagings by company artistic directors Colleen Neary (a Balanchine specialist) and Thordal Christensen (an alumnus of Bournonville's Royal Danish Ballet). Whether or not it can survive in our traditionally inhospitable dance landscape, their Los Angeles Ballet is the real thing, a force for many kinds of excellence that deserves the community's attention and support.

One could wish that as the company moves from Westwood to Redondo Beach and then to Glendale this month, the dancers might relax into their roles and enjoy their dancing as much as the audience does. It's not a matter of smiles (of which there were plenty Thursday) but of the sense of interpretive freedom within

the choreography that only Melissa Barak and a very few others showed opening night.

Barak's individual and often spontaneous attacks came in Balanchine's "Concerto Barocco," which always seems to be a showcase for conservative classical purity until you look more closely and see the innovative body-foldings, partnering experiments and other creative wonders that Balanchine devised in 1941 to music by Bach.

Mirroring Barak in the outer sections and becoming the work's focus in the central duet, Corina Gill gave a rapt, secure performance, partnered with great nobility by Oleg Gorboulev.

Gill and Gorboulev also brought their remarkable ability to deliver a string of choreographic fireworks as one brilliantly sustained phrase to Balanchine's "Agon," an inspired 1957 game of neoclassic one-upmanship played with and against Igor Stravinsky. All fire and ice, whimsical forays into off-balance balance and a modernistic milestone, the choreography can look a lot jauntier than it did Thursday, but Neary's deadpan staging did allow all the non sequiturs to take you by surprise.

As with "Concerto Barocco," the company as a whole often managed the complex passages more artfully than the simplest steps, but Lauren Toole endowed both with a serene confidence in her technical control. Sergey Kheylik threw himself into his solo with complete abandon, but neatness definitely counted here, and his wild vivacity proved far more useful in the divertissements from Bournonville's "Napoli."

With music by Helsted and Paulli, the celebratory "Napoli" pas de six and tarantella date from 1842, before classical bravura acquired the edge of aggression it gained, for better or worse, in Russia. If "Agon" is consummately spiky and "Concerto Barocco" supremely flowing, this quasi-Italianate showpiece is indomitably fluffy, marked by major shifts in tempo and pressure (to which the company needs greater attention) but always light and genial.

On Thursday, exposed balances in extension sometimes proved

shaky and terminations not always ideally clean. But it was fascinating to see what elements of Bournonville style attracted the individual soloists and dominated their performances.

Guest Rainer Krenstetter of the Berlin Staatsballett had the sparkle, Masahiro Suehara the precision, Gill the sweetness and Toole the calm center. Kheylik, as always, brought invigorating energy to the party.

The excerpt also displayed the talents of Peter Snow, Kelly Ann Sloan, Alexandra Blacker, Nancy Richer and Erin Rivera-Brennand. Everyone looked yummy in Soren Frandsen's prismatic abstractions of folk costumes and behaved as if an L.A. company dancing a Danish interpretation of Italian folklore was, somehow, natural casting.

Taped music accompanied all the pieces on the program.

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