

Los Angeles Ballet braves the Balanchine test

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By Lewis Segal, Times Staff Writer

Los Angeles Ballet aimed high with the final program of its inaugural season. In the first of four Southland performances, the company danced three masterworks by George Balanchine at UCLA's Freud Playhouse on Thursday. There's no place to hide in this repertory — you can't charm or fake your way through the steps. And everyone would notice if you tried.

Familiar to local ballet audiences, "Apollo," "Serenade" and "Rubies" each requires a different attack — a different mediation between technical and expressive challenges — and many of the dancers on view were new to their roles. Inevitably, the results proved imperfect, but also entertaining, instructive, even redemptive.

Certainly Colleen Neary's authoritative staging of "Apollo" made a stronger case for this historic 1928 collaboration between Balanchine and Igor Stravinsky than the wrongheaded, cutesy-poo Joffrey Ballet production recently danced at the Music Center.

Oleg Gorboulev hadn't yet pulled together all the facets of the title role on Thursday, but his nobility of bearing and partnering skills sustained him even when interpretive issues became unfocused. Melissa Barak and Erin Rivera-Brennan easily outclassed their Joffrey counterparts as Polyhymnia and Calliope — and, as Terpsichore, Corina Gill scored the first of her two Balanchine/Stravinsky triumphs on Thursday.

In staging Balanchine, Neary has to decide which versions of the choreography to adopt, sometimes opting to include passages that Balanchine deleted late in his lifetime (the birth scene in "Apollo," for example), but elsewhere incorporating the revisions he made (as in "Serenade"). Her sense of the dynamic contrasts within a work always yield maximum interest — the payoff between sharp footwork and floating arms in the crucial "Serenade" corps passages being especially artful.

This 1935 creation to music by Tchaikovsky also benefited from Lauren Toole's varied, sympathetic portrayal of the central ballerina in distress — yearning for a connection with Gorboulev but preempted by the mysterious Elizabeth Claire Walker. Dancing a buoyant interlude with the technically accomplished guest artist Brooklyn Mack, the fleet, vibrant Kelly Ann Sloan offered further evidence of the company's careful casting and coaching.

The playful virtuosity of "Rubies" (more Balanchine/Stravinsky, this time from 1967) found Toole a little too passive as a kind of classical showgirl but Gill positively radiant, untroubled by every hazard in the galvanic pas de deux and solos.

Opposite her, Sergey Kheylik again demonstrated his ability to turn choreography into a passionate personal statement, a spontaneous act of affirmation. Sometimes the outcome can look impossibly willful — ragamuffin neoclassicism in this case. But it's never unsure or half-hearted, even when he ends the ballet and the whole evening one count behind everyone else.

After the final repeat of this program on June 2, Los Angeles Ballet has scheduled no more performances until "Nutcracker" time nearly half a year from now. Plans for 2008 are pending.

This first season has clearly been a learning experience for artistic directors Neary and her husband, Thordal Christensen.

The number of performances was cut back from initial announcements, live music abandoned in favor of tape and the use of guest dancers curtailed. But Neary and Christensen delivered consistently fine dancing on every program, with the corps and the principals always matched stylistically (a virtue often missing in long-established, star-laden companies) and the prowess of leads such as Gill, Barak and Gorboulev something to cheer about.

They've proved that they can give Los Angeles a classical company worth supporting in its growth from an underfunded 31-dancer ensemble offering sporadic performances to the kind of large-scale, year-round institutions that are the source of local pride in cities such as Houston, Boston, Seattle, Miami and San Francisco.

They've done their job and so have the dancers. The rest is up to Los Angeles itself.

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