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# Los Angeles Ballet: A spring in its step

Review: The fledgling company opens its second season with a strong new ballet and three classics.

**By LAURA BLEIBERG**

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To state the obvious, Los Angeles Ballet's identity will be forged through its repertory and how its dancers perform.

But the fledgling company's true branding will take form from the dances it commissions: the ballets it has that no one else does.

Los Angeles Ballet artistic directors Colleen Neary and Thordal Christensen know that. So for this, the second season, they ordered up two new pieces for their 26 dancers. The first one, "Lost in Transition" by soloist Melissa Barak, debuted at the spring season opener this weekend at UCLA's Freud Playhouse. It is a smart, taut and whimsical winner. Ballet is not baseball, but let's just say that signing "free agent" Barak and bringing her back from Manhattan to her Los Angeles hometown was one of Neary's and Christensen's smartest decisions. Frustrated in the corps de ballet at New York City Ballet, and already an accomplished choreographic craftsman, Barak is blossoming further as a dancer with LAB.

With "Lost in Transition," this 20-something advanced, too, as a dance-maker. Her four-movement premiere demonstrated clear purpose and great skill in execution, especially with the corps de ballet. The complicated layers and patterns she knitted for the all-female ensemble continuously surprised this viewer, and then delighted with each succeeding revelation.

She gave us a trail of treats to follow using repeated motifs, which guided us gently, not obviously, through the piece.

Barak's choreographic "voice" is rooted in the modernism of George Balanchine (like other NYCB alumni), but she is quickly finding her own movement colors and pitch. "Lost" is sleek abstraction, but with warm undertones, just like the (recorded) score, selections from two separate concerti by composer and virtuoso bassist Edgar Meyer.

Barak began with an upstage line of women holding hands, their arms raised in a V. Like dominoes, they collapsed through a cascading canon. They pulled into a tight circle, and then burst open like flower petals exploding in fast motion.

In the third movement, the corps was clumped in four tiered rows and

occasionally burst into mechanistic, syncopated arm signals, a kinetic illustration of the chaotic musical outbursts unexpectedly sprinkled through Meyer's "Double Concerto for Cello and Double Bass."

For her lead couples, Aubrey Morgan and Damien Johnson – two sensational newcomers – and Erin Rivera-Brennard and Peter Snow, Barak provided brisk, if less interesting, partnering challenges. But Barak was never timid – when Rivera-Brennard exited at one point, the abandoned Snow wandered sadly about until she returned.

A trio for Sergey Kheylik, Lauren Toole and Kelly Ann Sloan was a sassy diversion, filled with loose torsos and rolling hips, big leaps for Kheylik and attacking footwork for Toole and Sloan. Patricia Guillem's neon-colored unitards and Tony Kudner's suggestively mysterious lighting were the appropriate finishing touches to this exciting piece.

The program's other three ballets highlighted the many moods of Balanchine. Neary and Christensen spread about the solo parts, coaching every with exactitude. Overall, the dancers were more relaxed and greatly improved from a year ago.

The cast approached the radical precision of "The Four Temperaments" (1946), to Paul Hindemith's equally revolutionary score, with still too much severity. But there were also sparks of adventurousness. In the "Melancholic" movement, Kheylik pulled his body to extremes, folding nearly in half forward and backward. His cat-like leaps soared ever upward and yet he still hit the floor, his body flat, on the beat. In "Sanguinic," Corina Gill amped up every inside and outside spin, losing a few, but still making the risks worthwhile. Her dependable partner, Peter Snow, also left caution at the wings and flew through his jumps. The dancers in the "Phlegmatic" section were one-note serious, but Andrew Brader's fluid arms and legs seemed to lengthen and ripple with each wave.

The bravura "Tarantella" (1964, music by Louis Moreau Gottschalk) followed "Lost in Transition" on the program – a dessert when one was not needed. But Gill and guest artist Rainer Krenstetter made it the dance equivalent of sweet sherbet, a light entertainment intended only to please. Gill impressed with her pointe work and balance, while Krenstetter's sunny disposition and beautifully articulated beats made him an irresistible presence.

The final act was devoted to "Who Cares?" (1970) and the dancers took to the Gershwin songs and the choreography's frothy sassiness with carefree and energetic eagerness. We were glad to see this other side of Los Angeles Ballet.

Barak was a sensuous and sophisticated soloist in "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise." Despite a few bobbles, Nancy Richer brought lyrical playfulness to "My One and Only." Morgan and guest artist Eddy Tovar filled "The Man I Love Duo" with aching love. The male ensemble sprang with palpable joy.

Los Angeles Ballet presented itself in the 600-seat Freud Playhouse, taking the box-office risks on its own shoulders. This same weekend at Royce Hall, UCLA Live was presenting the similarly attractive but inferior State Ballet of Georgia, and audience members commented to me how happy they were to see classical dance on the lineup. This is a ridiculous state of affairs. Los Angeles Ballet is coming up fast. Wake up, you folks at UCLA Live (and all you other presenters around town). Take this young talented group under your wing, because everyone will benefit.

**Contact the writer:** 714-796-4976 or [lbleiberg@ocregister.com](mailto:lbleiberg@ocregister.com)