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Review: *Contemporary 4* at Pacific Northwest Ballet

For the past several years, the dance community has had one pressing question: who will be the One to lead ballet into the twenty-first century? The deaths of Geroge Balanchine and Jerome Robbins signaled to some that ballet's death was imminent too, while others argued that, in time, someone would emerge who could create the same kind of iconic works. Every new choreographer seems to be judged by this standard, whether it be Alexei Ratmansky or Marco Goecke. Pacific Northwest Ballet's *Contemporary 4* program, which features works by these two men as well as Mark Morris and Paul Gibson, demonstrates just how deep and eclectic imagination runs in the ballet world today. No one person stands out as the answer to the question, but the combination of thoughtful choreography and vibrant dancing by the company ensures that these works will be around for a while.

Mark Morris' *Pacific*, which had its premiere at PNB back in 2007, was an agreeable though subdued start to the program. The curtain rises on three men standing in a circle, with loose cream and blue culottes billowing around their ankles. Suddenly, they fan out into movement and hardly stop from there, with endlessly curving arms and bounding jumps that flow across the stage, until the entrance of four women in seaweed-colored skirts. There doesn't seem to be any relation between the two groups, just a peaceful exploration of circular steps and thematic gestures. The entrance of a coral-hued couple, danced subtly by Rachel Foster and James Moore, is the first hint that *Pacific* is hiding more under its surface.

The two were truly the standouts of the piece. Moore in particular captured the sense of breath in Morris' choreography; his sinuous arms and precise jumps had so much lightness that it was like he was being tossed on the tide. Foster's *ballon* matched that of Moore, but she, like several others, appeared to be off her leg in some of the quick pirouettes at the beginning of the work. Because the simple atmosphere of *Pacific* demands so much precision to sustain, it was unfortunate that small stumbles had to pepper the section.

Thankfully, the evening only grew stronger from there. Marco Goecke's world premiere of *Place a Chill* showed us what other ideas the choreographer of pop hit *Mopey* has up his sleeve. The program notes imply that *Place a Chill* will be about "a world in which darkness, evil, and the opacity of filthy material are predominant," but amidst the frenetic arm twitches and spastic torso rolls it's hard to tell what exactly the dancers represent, if anything. This is not to say that the piece is directionless: Goecke uses the sheer complexity of his movement to introduce the audience to an entirely new way of viewing reality, where childish poses such as monster claws suddenly take on a much grimmer meaning. The cast—mostly corps members—tackled these challenges with admirable ferocity.

Andrew Bartee, Leah O'Connor, and James Moore took Goecke's relatively stationary choreography and used it to fill the whole of the stage, even when caught in a tight path of illumination by Randall G. Chiarelli's smoky, industrial lighting. Ezra Thomson also displayed commanding presence and lyricism in a lovely slow section where he rocked one of the girls back and forth across his knee like a porch swing. In fact, *Place a Chill* was filled with surprisingly poetic moments. The problem is that Goecke seems to belong to the school of "I had it first," choreographers, where quantity of props and effects represents emotional depth. The choreography is interesting enough on its own without gimmicky devices to distract from it. *Place a Chill* is not another *Mopey*, but it does beg for multiple viewings, especially considering its passionate Saint-Saens score (played live with cellist Page Smith).

Paul Gibson's *The Piano Dance*, the third piece, makes its reprise at PNB after a six-year hiatus. It proves to be a strong vehicle for showcasing the talents of the four couples, since Gibson uses a diverse piano score to divide up the ballet into trios, duets, and ensemble sections that are alternately witty, serious, and stark. There is a slight Balanchine flavor to the piece, in the use of rapid lunges and needle-sharp passes, but the musical and dramatic pacing is all Gibson's own. A section of impossibly fast chaineé turns from Margaret Mullin is followed by a smartly sassy waltz with Chalnessa Eames and Josh Spell, which leads into the memorable "spider pas de deux" for Lesley Rausch and Seth Orza. The wicked red of her dress matching a thin strip of light on the backdrop, Rausch exuded cool sexiness as she allowed Orza to flip her upside down and partner her in flicking, effortless developpés. Each of the sections in "The Piano Dance" resembled an appetizer: well-crafted, tasteful, and just enough to leave you asking for more.

The evening closed with the PNB premiere of Alexei Ratmansky's romp through a Shostakovich piece in *Concerto DSCH*. Ratmansky is, perhaps, the frontrunner in to be "the one," with an impressive international dance career and a slew of choreographic works that have attracted critical attention. His most recent creations include a production of *Don Quixote* for the Dutch National Ballet and an entirely new *Nutcracker* for American Ballet Theater, where he's an Artist in Residence. It's particularly exciting, then, to see PNB perform one of his works. *Concerto DSCH* is essentially an abstract ballet, but its use of pantomime and facial expressions hint at his affinity for narrative.

From the very start, when the audience sees the gold-and-maroon costumes of the corps, *DSCH* treads refreshing and unexpected territory. Carrie Imler, Batkhurel Bold, and Seth Orza gleefully exploded out of the corps' embrace, their energy mirrored by unison movements in the background. *DSCH* proceeded in an ever-shifting array of patterns that are often interrupted by humorous moments, such as Jerome Tisserand repeatedly bouncing up and down on his heels like a misbehaving little boy. The real glory of the piece, though, was in its central section. To the melodies of Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 2, Carla Korbes and Karel Cruz danced a pas de deux framed by gold-clad corps members. Korbes displayed her signature quiet passion, and was capably matched by the strong partnering skills of Cruz, who seems to have acquired a new level of confidence over the past few seasons. Their breathtaking lifts soared and then skimmed the floor, until both walked upstage to join hands with the waiting corps. An exuberant finale, filled with

quirky moments like a slow motion duet between Imler and Orza, was the perfect way to close.

When all is danced and done, PNB's *Contemporary 4* comes no closer to determining which choreographer will create a balletic revolution. Morris, Goecke, Gibson, and Ratmansky all have such individual voices that it is difficult to even begin comparing the works. This does, however, create a treat for PNB audiences who want an eclectic evening that displays the company's versatility and daring. Artistic Director Peter Boal has always been a proponent of new works, and these pieces do a good job of showing what is out there. Anyone interested in the future of ballet needs to see *Contemporary 4*. It's an adventure that's well worth the time.