

BalletBoyz at the Annenberg

Dancing beyond homophobia

Gary L. Day

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All-male dance troupes are in vogue these days. In years past there was a bias against them because of the perceived homoeroticism of men dancing together. Fortunately, today all-male choreography is judged as a valid realm of artistic exploration, and that homoeroticism, perceived or actual, is no longer a damnable component of the form. London's BalletBoyz is a brilliant example of how all-male modern dance has taken its place in the evolving world of contemporary choreography.



A kick-ass troupe. (Photo by Panayiotis Sinnos)

BalletBoyz was the season-opening presentation of Dance Celebration at the Annenberg, and it could not have been a stronger kickoff to the program's 32nd season. The company featured amazingly talented dancers in an evening featuring exquisite work by two of dance's brightest up-and-coming choreographers, supported by music and lighting that resulted in a thrilling show that left its

audience (myself included) leaping to its feet in a spontaneous expression of appreciation.

Rare synchrony

The program opened with *Serpent*, choreographed by Liam Scarlett to music by Max Richter. Scarlett is a multi-award winning choreographer who has worked with BalletBoyz for over a decade. His

familiarity with his dancers was evident in how his choreography played to the company's strengths. The theme, taken from the piece's title, emphasized sinuousness and grace, punctuated by a rhythmic strength in perfect sync with Richter's compelling score. That score, obviously influenced heavily by Philip Glass, was melodic and dramatic in ways Glass doesn't always manage to achieve, and Scarlett managed to achieve a rare synchrony between his dancers and the music.

The second half of the program was *Fallen*, choreographed by Russell Maliphant to music by Armand Amar. Maliphant emphasized the strength and masculinity of his dancers more than Scarlett did, leaving us with the notion that these were definitely BalletMen rather than BalletBoyz. However, like Scarlett, Maliphant's choreography was powered by and in sync with his music. Like Richter, composer Armand Amar was inspired by Philip Glass, but with more of a Bear McCreary sensibility. What mattered is whether the music worked well with the choreographer's work, and again, as with part one, the result was magical.

Both choreographers were adept with any number of dancers, from solos and duets up to sections that utilized all ten of the company's dancers. The artistry was abetted by able lighting by Michael Hulls. One particular artistic flourish during *Fallen* was the use of smoke to lend atmosphere. I don't know if it was by design or a fortunate flow of air currents, but as the smoke came out close to the floor on stage right, it flowed up and across the stage above the dancers, giving the effect of framing the company by smoke rather than immersing them in it. The effect was dramatic, indeed.

One of the things that makes live performance so precious is that it is of the moment, never to be repeated exactly. That is also the downside of the excitement of seeing work by artists like BalletBoyz — it is unlikely that the experience can ever be repeated. Fortunately, BalletBoyz make short films, often of excerpts from their current work. (You can see an excerpt from *Serpent* [here](#).) Granted, it's not the same as seeing these masterpieces live, but it can give a hint of the experience, and serve as a reminder to those of us fortunate enough to have been exalted by it.



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