

Annenberg Center Live presents BalletX

BalletX on tour at home

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Since BalletX is one of our great homegrown successes, I was happy to see the Annenberg Center Live series at the Zellerbach Theatre invite them to open their 2017 dance season. A new theater gives new perspective, and the Zellerbach, with a larger stage and seating capacity three times that of the company's home space, gave the audience a chance to see the company as others see it—on tour—without leaving home.



Jorma Elo's *Gran Partita* opened the program with music from Berg's Lyric Suite, Allegro; Mozart's Serenade No. 10 in B Flat Major; Monteverdi's "*L'Incoronazione di Poppea*"; and Bach's Violin Sonata No. 3 in C Major and "*Clavierbuchlein*," Book II, for *Anna Magdalena*. Elo has said the film *Touch of Evil* inspired this dance.

Drew Billiau's shadowy lighting was suitably noir, while Christine Darch's costumes, sleek white-on-white

Francesca Forcella and Gary W. Jeter II in Cayetano Solo's 'Gran Partita.'
(Photo by Alexander Iziliaev)

leotards for the women and white pants for the men, added light. The piece combined the precise clarity of

classical ballet with the passion and angular tension of contemporary dance, propelled by the music's insistent tempo.

The dancers wowed with extensions as elegant in the low, horizontal movement as in the vertical. When I talked to Christine Cox this summer, she asked the rhetorical question: "Do we only have heart [when we dance] in socks and bare feet?" *Gran Partita* answered that question emphatically, with a swoony opening *pas de deux* in which Francesca Forcella and Gary W. Jeter II moved around and over each other with lyrical grace and feeling. The company was generally in good form, but this pair stood out as exemplars of heart expressed in beautiful technique.

For a complete change of pace, Cayetano Soto's *Malasangre* followed with laugh-out-loud bits and an angular style that contrasted with the liquid elegance that came before. I loved La Lupe's vibrant Latin music. The dancers were sharp, playful, and slyly sexy.

That said, this was not my favorite Soto piece. The contrast between the cheerful music and humor, and an aggressively frenetic tension in the dance, was interesting but not entirely comfortable. I salute dance for being uncomfortable; that's part of the fun. But the hands were too busy and I found myself worried a dancer would slip and fall on the bits of paper strewn on the stage.

Booze and Bunny Ears

In his reviews of February 11 and August 17, 2016, *New York Times* dance critic Alistair Macaulay **took Philadelphia audiences to task** for not laughing at Trey McIntyre's *Big Ones*, a quirky piece set to the music of Amy Winehouse, with costumes by Reid Bartelme and Harriet Jung.



Gary W. Jeter II in Trey McIntyre's 'Big Ones.' (Photo by Alexander Iziliaev)

As a member of that audience then and now, I like *Big Ones* but I do not think it is funny per se. Like the liquor and ladies' nights at the bars in the Winehouse songs, it lures us in but never hides its darker side. Tragedy is so inextricably entwined with wit that laughter dies at the lump in the throat.

You would be forgiven for expecting a comical piece. The dancers appear in brown pleather shorts and tops, with headgear that looks like bunny ears or lofty helmets. The tall headpieces are

awkward and must be difficult to navigate in the dance. They remind us of Winehouse's own towering beehive hairstyle, a physical manifestation of the internal burdens weighing her down like those headpieces.

Winehouse died of alcohol poisoning less than five years before the premier of the ballet. When the music begins with the boozy/bluesy “Rehab,” it is not hard to connect the dance to the singer’s struggles.

A highlight of the piece was “F**ck Me Pumps,” danced with saucy bravado by Andrea Yorita, Francesca Forcella, and Skyler Lubin—three women on the make for a millionaire and running out of time. The song drips acid wit, and the dancers do it justice. Chloe Perkes & Zachary Kapeluck danced to “Valerie,” a song Winehouse covered but did not write. (Indie band the Zutons did that.)

The dance was whimsical and sweet, with Kapeluck performing Winehouse’s trademark crazy-leg step so incongruously on his tall frame. He attempted to make himself smaller to win the skittish Chloe Perkes as the lyrics sang of a drunk phone call to a friend who may still be in jail.

The choreographer’s notes say: “We are caught in a war between wanting to be great and wanting to be loved.” His dance says war is brave, ridiculous, and tragic. A sophisticated dance audience familiar with BalletX’s repertoire could, and did, savor this piece in all its complexity, without much laughing.



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