

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Panayiotis Sinnos

An Unconventional Balance

by Whitney Weinstein

Graceful. Elegant. Light. These are the qualities expected of dancers in a ballet company. BalletBoyz delivered, adding strength, flawless technique, and expressiveness to the mix.

Co-founded by former Royal Ballet dancers Michael Nunn and William Trevitt, BalletBoyz has been intriguing viewers since 2000. Ten male dancers, the majority of whom have been classically trained in ballet, compose this modern dance company. I can't decide which is the most fascinating aspect of this ensemble: the delicate execution of movement by extremely muscular bodies, the athletic, but thoughtful, choreography, or the scramble of gender role expectations.

As part of the Annenberg's 32nd season of Dance Celebration, BalletBoyz presented two works, both of which premiered last year in the UK.

The curtain rose on short video clips from the rehearsal process of the opening piece, *Serpent*. Liam Scarlett, the choreographer, spoke of exploring a sense of fluidity and animalism, aiming to create work that is "supple and beautiful" with "deadly attack underneath."

The absence of women was at first easy to disregard. The vision of the well-trained bodies in motion was captivating, and the pace and intricacies of the choreography drew viewers forward. The men charmed the audience with subtle sweetnesses, like the wavering extension of a wrist or a soft and playful bump to the exposed flesh of another. The dancing was intimate and seamless. As they moved closer and their expressions came into view, I was reminded of the rarity of an all-male cast, especially in a form where women, or sexually/romantically-attracted pairings, so often drive a piece.

Particular moments were reminiscent of a traditional pas de deux. Contact of back to chest or hand to neck was sensual, but lacked romantic associations. The dance was not about love, but held an appreciation of the functionality and beauty of the human form.

Russell Maliphant, creator of *Fallen*, claimed as his challenge working with a large group. Accustomed to working in solos, duets, and trios, he allowed the ensemble's varying skills to inform each other's movements. A spotlight shone down to center stage, like the sun penetrates into a deep hole, illuminating two circles of dancers, one inside the other. The circles of men revolved, dancers rolled, unfaltering, pausing briefly in squats or on their knees, bringing forth an undertone of animalistic qualities. Slices, jabs, and flicks of their limbs towards one another manifested a sense of combat. The pulsing drums built tension against the string instruments in the music as the dancers diffused and scattered. Like creatures cheering on a fight with intensity and curiosity, the men lurked around the edges of the space, focusing on the smaller groups that exchanged in and out of the center. They attempted repeatedly to climb one another and stand, lingering only for a moment on a back or thigh before falling like a plank into the arms of other partners. As I grew less engaged in the repetitive choreographic structure, I began to wonder if Maliphant was regressing into his stated comfort with making small group work.

In 2015, audiences can anticipate a BalletBoyz piece involving two female dancers. With a company that already questions gender expectations, I am eager to see what these new additions will bring.

BalletBoyz: theTALENT, Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, October 23-25, 2014.

By Whitney Weinstein

November 20, 2014