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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Lauren Hirsch

Ballet Up Close and Personal with Bryan Koulman

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

Fine ballet dancing thrills me. When seen up close, the technique—designed for opera house magnitude—can reveal its wobbles or, in fortunate cases, double its virtuosic whammy. In his show at the intimate Performance Garage, Bryan Koulman's fine group of artists—dancers and musicians—splashed balletic bravura across the footlights. [Koulman](#), now teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy of Ballet, infuses his work with both modern dance and ballet movement, supported when possible by finely performed live music.

Opening with recorded music, Koulman's "Weather Report" exposed his vocabularies in two groupings: tutu-and-pointe-shoe ballerinas alternating with unitard-and-soft-slipper couples. The tutu group danced at times with angularity and flexed joints, while drawing on familiar building blocks such as arabesques, port de bras, pirouettes, and sautés; the unitard pairs, in contrast, swayed their hips, fell to the floor, occasionally mixed gender roles among partners, and gestured with overt emotional intensity. As the groups came and went from the stage, Nikolai McKenzie eventually emerged from the unitard pairs to move seamlessly into the evening's second dance, "Icarus," a duet with an A-frame ladder set under a single stage light. A gripping and idiosyncratic mover, McKenzie embodied the story of reaching into the burning sun, heat dripping from his lithe body and his inner world alight with pained ecstasy. Pianist Benjamin Richard Hoffman's sensitive playing of Tchaikovsky's 18 Morceaux #2 added poignant anguish to this moving work. While Tchaikovsky is, in the ballet world, a musical god of danced drama, Koulman here probed his music for subtle emotion rather than melodramatic narrative.

Act 1 closed with the evening's highlight as cellist Branson Yeast joined Hoffman, on piano, to perform the music for "Haydn Concerto." This big balletic bite gave Koulman's cast of ten a satisfying series of flying stage-crossings, elegant balances, multiple pirouettes, and pliant poses. I appreciated the varied choreographic patterns as the dancers flowed through satisfying groupings, came and went seamlessly from the stage, and responded with lively alertness to the music and to one another. Featuring several dancers from Pennsylvania Ballet, the adagio pas de deux section was particularly lovely, climaxing with Albert Gordon and Lucia Erickson in a sparkling circle of lifts, splits, pivots, and poses.

Opening the show's second half, "Luna," for five women in short blue dresses, mixed more grounded material with Koulman's contemporary take on ballet. The recorded Baroque music was lovely, but after the live playing of Hoffman and Yeast, a bit of a let-down. Here, as in his other dances, the choreographer allowed us the pleasure of stillness at times: when it seemed right for the dancers to be there—present but quiet—we could enjoy watching them in held, contemplative moments. While consistent with Koulman's choreography in other works, "Luna" featured more flexion, bending, and floor-bound movement. Also evident here was his singling out of two dancers—Autumn Dzegrenuk and Julia Ostrowski—for their virtuosic combination of strength, speed, and groundedness in a duet moving from aerial cavorting to powerful floor work.

The evening closed with a charming romp for three men in Boy Scout summer-camp garb, gamboling to Telemann's Concerto for Three Trumpets and Timpani (recorded). Eyley Austin, Albert Gordon, and Santiago Paniagua revealed their balletic panache with skill and humor, sharing their fun in leaping, balancing, and waltzing themselves right down to the floor. I relished seeing them so personal and precise in the Performance Garage theater, despite the thudding drum of a stage that broadcast the occasional heavy landing from a leap. The dancing fun, enlivened with musical and movement wit, still left me hungry: I yearned for Koulman to move beyond the waltzing pas de bourrées and similar tropes that I came to recognize in this and other works presented. Especially in "Trumpets," I wished his choreography would let loose the really big bravura show that male balletic technique is designed to deliver, and that this cast would have reveled in. We came close, but.... maybe next time. I hope I'll be there to see it.

And more live music, *please!*

[Bryan Koulman Dance Co.](#), Performance Garage, June 6-8

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