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BalletX Reflects on Loneliness, Hope, and the Holidays

by Christina Catanese

December in America can feel like being on the receiving end of a firehose spewing sparkle and merriment. Sure, there is hope and mirth as we spend time with loved ones and reflect on the passing year, but it's not uncomplicated joy for everyone. In its *Fall Series*, BalletX premiered two holiday-inspired ballets by Jo Strømngren and Matthew Neenan, which reflected on the loneliness, pressure, and stress that can accompany the intense togetherness of this season.

Strømngren's *The Moon* (with music by Mette Henriette) follows two astronauts in space (portrayed by Zachary Kapeluck and Andrea Yorita). They have trouble with their ship but are trying to get home in time for Christmas, despite complicated and unresolved family and romantic situations. Strømngren noted in the pre-show Q&A that space didn't interest him so much as distance, which affords a look back on deeply familiar things, now far away and suddenly so small. *The Moon* provided spaciousness to reflect on what we may need distance from as the year winds down.

The piece blended spoken dialogue between the astronauts with a more abstract interweaving chorus of eight dancers. It was not explained what the corps of dancers represented—variously they seemed to take on the persona of the stars, the astronauts' relationships on Earth, and the things they weren't saying to each other or acknowledging to themselves. I had too many questions about the thin storyline to be fully immersed in the world Strømngren was creating, but when I focused on the dancing, I felt myself also floating in space. The movement juxtaposed rooted, celestial, organic, and mechanical qualities, evoking the energy of the cosmos, spacecraft, and human drama.

At the packed opening night performance, a technical issue with the video projection (created by Jorge Cousineau, drawn from NASA footage video) briefly stopped the show. After watching the first few minutes of *The Moon* a second time, the projection dramatically changed how I saw the movement. The fully realized work provided a full-scrim view of space framed through the ship's window, taking us on a journey with the astronauts, at times floating or careening.

Neenan's *Twelve Bells* (co-created with Rosie Langabeer and Tara Middleton, both previous collaborators of [Neenan](#) and [BalletX](#)) didn't have a plot, per se, but rather a clear, relatable, and authentic story. It followed three characters (danced by Chloe Perkes, Andrea Yorita, and Richard Villaverde) who experience "depressive alienation" during the holiday season. Choreographed gestures, occasional pantomime, sets by Maiko Matsushima, and festive props portrayed a holiday vibe without being too heavy-handed.

Neenan nailed an artful construction of the sensation of being at a party and not having the same experience as everyone else. Among the many strong cast members, Perkes stood out at switching between controlled, graceful movements and quick, spasmodic ones—I most believed her struggle between holding it together and falling apart, while attempting a sunny exterior. *Twelve Bells* may not be for Christmas enthusiasts who put their decorations up in October, but will resonate with anyone who has felt victimized or isolated by relentless holiday cheer.

Langabeer, Middleton, and musician Joshua Machiz performed the music onstage and were thoughtfully choreographed in relation to the dancers and sets. The dynamic layering of solos, duets, and large groups with moving musicians, instruments, and objects was elegant, seamless, and rich. The music started ethereally with singing bowls and bells alongside a dreamy accumulation of dancers. Even tapping pointe shoes became part of the percussive landscape. The score evolved into melodic songs with lyrics, contemporary carols with more complex messages, like, "It's a very special day ... for somebody else," and "I just have to get through December." I particularly enjoyed one song whose melody was original but with lyrics snipped from dozens of classic carols.

At one point, the company danced with hand-held bells. I loved their rhythmic contribution, along with the less intentional sounds the bells made—the light, incidental jingling when the dancers promenaded on one foot with the bell held in the crook of their opposite knee. By the time they hammered, in unison, twelve frustrated clangs of their bells, I was ready for the year to be over right along with them.

Though I'm an admitted *Nutcracker* nut, it was refreshing to see a nuanced take on holiday dance that had nothing to do with the Christmas ballet classic. Without getting grinchy, both works gave permission to not feel universally or unquestioningly positive about the holidays. They provided a reminder that we can get through this frenetic month, and at the end of it, we're rewarded with a new year, a fresh start, and ever longer and lighter days. And with its [still-new home](#) and [fall cover story in Dance Magazine](#), BalletX's glow brightens, too.

[Fall Series](#), BalletX, Wilma Theater, December 4-15.

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