

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Erin Baiano

Having Fun at the Ballet

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

When was the last time you actually had fun seeing the ballet? Well, go to Pennsylvania Ballet's "On Edge," and you will. In fact, the fun-quotient increases as the program progresses.

The show opens with the company's first work by choreographer Helen Pickett, for eleven years a dancer with William Forsythe and now a much-presented dance-maker herself. A world premiere, *Tilt* features costumes of richly varied colors, textures, and patterns by Pickett's long-time collaborator, Emma Kingsbury, who also designed the set: a large tilted platform ending in a partial wall toward stage left, with two large, irregular boulders leaning against it. Dancers appear from surprising directions, including from under the platform, some scrambling onto it, some marching behind the wall, others filling the open floor space, and four men leaping across the depths upstage. David Finn's exquisite lighting turns the dancers into blazing fireflies with deep reds, coolly highlights them in white, or darkens the atmosphere with saturated blues. The lighting and sets are not alone in creating spatial riches: the dancers shape and pierce the space with arm gestures and lifts, they tilt and fall flat, stretch apart and lean into one another. As I watched, I was truly on the edge of my seat to track the patterns, to grasp the entire stage, to follow the dancers' movements on, off, behind, above, around the set. While some dancers fell into a kind of habitual emoting, not trusting the power of the movement to make its statement, others—particularly Yuka Iseda, Jermel Johnson, and Zecheng Liang—were spot-on.

PAB's choreographer-in-residence, Matthew Neenan, presents his eighteenth world première with this season's *It goes that way*, music by Laurie Anderson. Her lyrics channel everyone's worried mother, rehearsing scenarios of possible disaster in relentless phone calls and messages. Neenan, lightly wicked in response, gives the dancers shrugging gestures, hand flicks, head-scratching, body-patting, and the occasional shout for good measure. They deflate from lifted, stretched ballet dancers to slouching, shuffling, squatting humans. Dancers *are* humans, and hooray for it! One is even apparently pregnant in her revealing unitard, and I'm delighted by her dancing. The most fun of all, though, is when corps dancer Albert Gordon, who looks to be about 15, takes an extended solo that brings out his/our

inner, curious, and gawky child—scooting, finger drumming, rolling, running, leaping, foot-tapping, belly-rubbing, hair-ruffling, and sometimes spinning or soaring with lovely precision. As the “older” dancers return to the stage, he manages to merge with them, but also to stay deliciously himself, just that bit more vulnerable, curious, lovable, and self-involved.

And now for the belly laughs: Swedish choreographer Alexander Ekman’s *Episode 31* starts with video footage of the PAB dancers, as a flock, doing the *Fame* thing throughout our fair city—real ballet phrases, from what we later see on stage—in the City Hall fountains, before the Union League entryway, on the Art Museum steps, through the subway, and also in their own studios on N. Broad St. While a couple of people in the street look askance at them, a few join right in. The audience is in stitches. Then comes the dance itself, with James Ihde circumambulating the stage in slow-mo, the cast dressed in bizarre versions of Victorian menswear and mustachios (ballerinas, too), shoes on and off, and hilarious hijinks, including shouting gibberish as they race through their phrases, and lifting strips of flooring panels onto their shoulders like way-oversized superman capes. There is some gorgeous dancing along the way, like the strangely refined yet competitive duet between Etienne Diaz and Liang, watched by the entire cast, clustered upstage left, in elegant daguerreotype grouping—garters, mustaches, bowler hats, and all.

A good laugh at the ballet—you don’t get that every day!

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