

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Courtesy of Stars of American Ballet

A Ballet Sampler Platter

by Christina Catanese

At [Stars of American Ballet](#), audiences were treated to a chef's tasting menu of ballet, with longtime New York City Ballet (NYCB) principal dancer [Daniel Ulbricht](#) behind the stove. I feasted on the athleticism and artistry of nine spectacular dancers (most but not all from NYCB) in eight dance works, chosen by Ulbricht to sample a range of styles, moods, and music. These small delicacies added up to a banquet.

Ulbricht convened *Stars of American Ballet* in 2013 as a touring group of top-caliber dancers from major ballet companies, with a particular focus on traveling to cities that "rarely host ballet performances." Though Philadelphia hardly fits this description, these stars nevertheless satisfied in their Philadelphia debut.*

The program moved briskly through the varied terrains of classical and contemporary ballet. The choreography of New York City Ballet co-founder and star choreographer George Balanchine featured prominently, amounting to three of the works on the menu ([Tarantella](#), [Apollo pas de deux](#), and the "Diamonds" *pas de deux* from [Jewels](#)). Contemporary greats Christopher Wheeldon and Alexei Ratmansky rounded out the program, along with works by the dancers themselves.

No piece featured more than three performers, likely a practical choice, given the nature of *Stars*, but one that allowed me to appreciate the individual dancers and relationships among them. Rather than large group works with many bodies and complex formations, the small casts let me see the *people* dancing. Indeed, during the post-show talkback, the conversation regularly turned to who the dancers were outside their dancing—how they spend their time offstage, where they come from—humanizing a profession that can appear held on a pedestal.

The smaller seating capacity of the Annenberg Center's Zellerbach Theater (about a third of NYCB's grand home theater in Lincoln

Center) enhanced this sense of intimacy. Seeing “Diamonds” so close-up revealed not just the enduring brilliance of this classic, but also the flexion of the dancers’ muscles, the intricacies of the partner work, the character expression, and the small gestures performed with the intention and graceful exactitude that defines a true star.

In several works, I could hear the sounds of the dancers’ exertion: their breathing in the quiet pas de deux from Ratmansky’s [Pictures at an Exhibition](#); their energetic vocalizing in the virtuosic [Tres Hombres](#) (a jaw-dropping curtain-closer full of jumps and turns choreographed and performed by Ulbricht, Denys Drozdyuk, and Joseph Gatti). At times the lack of sound said more, as with Ulbricht’s cat-like, nearly noiseless landings from his buoyant leaps.

The audience regularly expressed their admiration, as deserved after the dizzying turns during Ulbricht’s jazzy, ebullient solo, *Tatum*, which kicked off the second act. But I particularly relished the hushed *mmm* of disbelief that swept through the theater during a striking moment in Wheeldon’s [Liturgy](#). Ask la Cour guided Teresa Reichlen in a slow promenade with only the lightest touch of his forearm, as she reached low in a deep [penché](#). For me, *Liturgy* was the standout piece of the night, with its quietness, mystery, and precision winning out over the “wow” pieces.

For the most part, the works’ variety flowed and built upon one another satisfyingly. The only work that felt out of place was [Irresistible](#), a ballroom duet between Drozdyuk and Antonina Skobina of NBC’s World of Dance. Following directly after the spare elegance of *Liturgy* and *Apollo*, I felt unprepared for the flash and sparkle of made-for-TV tricks and the blaring of “Smooth Criminal.” It gave me a bit of whiplash. Yet, as Ulbricht noted in the talkback, audiences today are increasingly receiving dance from television and online, so perhaps this choice aimed to include audiences beyond ballet insiders. I wasn’t sure how a ballroom number fit with an evening of ballet, but it was the program’s only gesture towards [ballet’s diversity problem](#).

A force in today’s ballet scene, Ulbricht guided us through a thoughtfully curated evening with something ballet-flavored for a wide range of tastes. These dancer-led intimate moments, with ballet from a variety of perspectives, whet my appetite for additional helpings.

* In fact, ballet in Philadelphia is thriving, and has been reviewed on tD several times over the past year. A few of our recent pieces cover [Pennsylvania Ballet](#), [Dance Theatre of Harlem](#), [BalletX](#), and [Bryan Koulman Dance Co.](#)

[Stars of American Ballet](#), Stars of American Ballet, Annenberg Center, Oct 18-19.

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