

Ballet West's 'Innovations' is invigorating

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For the Deseret News

Published: Monday, May 16, 2011 5:56 p.m. MDT

"INNOVATIONS," BALLET WEST, Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center, Jeanne Wagner Theater, Saturday, additional performances through May 21 (355-2787)

There's not a bad seat in the house at the Jeanne Wagner theatre where Ballet West launched its season-closer, "Innovations 2011," over the weekend. The series, which continues through Saturday, features four creations by Ballet West's own dancers as well as the premiere of "White Noise" by up-and-coming guest choreographer, Avichai Scher.

What distinguishes this program has very much to do with the unusually intimate setting. Watching the dancers at close range is a vastly different experience for both performer and audience. Even powerhouse principal dancers seem more human to the audience — their capacities shimmering, their vulnerabilities exposed. Pulsing muscles, audibly strained breathing, sweat that materializes through powdered faces — even the subtle tightening of a grip between partners is not lost on observers.

The program opens on a soul-searching note with principal dancer Christopher Ruud's premiere titled "Trapped." In the piece, a commentary that perhaps takes itself a bit too seriously, Ruud examines the boxed-in trappings of society complete with an intense stringed score, stripped-down sets and costumes, red overhead lighting and a slit in the left wing from which dancer Lindsay Duerfeldt (I attended the Saturday matinee which featured the second cast) "escaped" from the stage.

Audiences will more likely be transfixed by the breakout pas de deux that feature jaw-dropping lifts, tosses and intersections than with some of the more frantic movement in the piece's vocabulary. Partnering is a specialty of Ruud's on the performing side, so it comes as no surprise that this is where he shines when he creates as well.

Next up is soloist Tom Mattingly's "Fall Into Loving Arms," which pairs Debussy and Chopin's gorgeous music with three alternating pas de deuxs in an examination of love over time. Like watching a watercolor come to life, Mattingly's work is lyrical, vivid and intoxicating. Standouts include demi-soloist Sayaka Ohtaki — a speck of a dancer with larger-than-life grace, precision and most especially a gift for expression — and artist Adrian Fry, who also snagged a lead role in Scher's work later in the program.

Demi-soloist Christopher Anderson's "Intonation" follows. A celebration of women with an all-female ensemble, it uniquely showcases their athleticism and features artsy photos of the cast during pauses. The movement is often coy and playful, with an emphasized use of arm and a breezy vocabulary. The overall effect is beautiful if not slightly muted and subdued. A pas de trois of women who use each other for support as opposed to a male counterpart reflects their stand-alone strength.

Emily Adams' "Regarding Us" comes next. A study in perspective set to the music of Vivaldi, Tarrega and Brahms, the effect resembles a focusing camera lens: Those on the fringes blur while the leads sparkle with clarity. Katherine Lawrence, Rex Tilton, Jacqueline Straughan and Michael Bearden danced a poignant pas de quatre, with some unique choreographic moments that deserve a nod. Although some movement felt at odds with the music, Adams shows promise.

Serving as the contrasting bookend to the show is Scher's closing piece, "White Noise," a minimalist jazz ensemble. The thumping double bass, chilled piano and syncopated cymbals of Matt McBane's score provide an interesting juxtaposition against the discipline and polish of ballet. Scher wisely chose to make good use of the pointe shoe, which helped him do what he does best: make individual dancers shine.

One of the highlights of a premiere is seeing how the choreographer draws inspiration from his dancers. Christianna Bennett and Ruud, for instance, broke out in a tailor-made pas de deux that also showcased a masterful display of Scher's musicality. Matching the sultry stringed melodic line with Bennett's mesmerizing ability to stretch and recoil and the grooving undercurrent rhythms with Ruud's naturally up-tempo, athletic style was striking.

There were a few distracting moments. Some gestures seemed peculiar, and the score, which initially felt fresh, became painfully repetitive at certain points. That aside, the piece was unique, solid and made good use of music and individual talent. I'm certain we have not seen the last of Scher or "White Noise" on the global stage.

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