

The Salt Lake Tribune

New Ballet West production is fresh and vibrant

By Celia R. Baker

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The best salsas are prepared of just-picked, raw ingredients. They have a fresh, vibrant taste no canned version can match. Ballet West's "Innovations" evening of world premieres is like that.

The five never-seen ballets on the program are achingly fresh, and watching them unfold is a bracing, delicious experience. On Friday's opening night, they were performed by the dancers on whose bodies they were created, with a passion born of ownership.

"White Noise," a new work by New York City choreographer Avichai Scher, is the evening's exuberant centerpiece. At age 27, Scher has already choreographed for important American companies.

Scher understands music, and how to turn it into movement. He creates intricate, fluid dance that flatters the talent of Ballet West's artists. "White Noise" is a jazzy, edgy charmer that builds momentum right up to its big finish. It begs to be seen again.

Four of the "Innovations" choreographers are Ballet West dancers. This opportunity to choreograph for a professional production bespeaks artistic director Adam Sklute's belief that investing in his own dancers' creative talent pays off. He's right.

Those dividends are evident in the work of principal dancer Christopher Ruud, who created a short work for the first "Innovations" program three years ago. "Trapped," Ruud's 20-minute piece for 11 dancers, shows a strong progression.

"Trapped" is set within a curtained box, its fourth side open to the audience. In this confined space, dancers confront serious issues — the human complications of group behavior, conformity, and nonconformity. Ruud's movement vocabulary has innate musicality, and bears a stamp of individuality that hints he is creating art from his life experiences.

Ballet West could someday produce an important choreographer through its "Innovations" program, and it might be Ruud. If so, it wouldn't be the first time. His father, the late Tomm Ruud, was a principal dancer at Ballet West before becoming a noted choreographer.

Three 10-minute pieces by Ballet West dancers fill out the program. Tom Mattingly's "Fall Into Loving Arms" is a flowing work for three couples. This relationship drama is nostalgic, emotive

and lovely to watch. Mattingly has choreographed before, and experience shows in this pretty piece.

Christopher Anderson's "Intonation" is a stark, angular work. Its sections are introduced by stunning photographic projections of the dancers' hands, limbs and faces shot by Erik Östling. The dancing of its all-woman cast is arresting, as are the effects of Nicholas Cavallaro's theatrical lighting. Greater integration between the photography and dancing could make the work even stronger.

Emily Adams' "Regarding Us," for five couples, employs shifting patterns and symmetries in a way that references Balanchine, yet is fresh. David Huevel's purple and garnet costumes are eye-catching, though the men's half-sheer tops and bold-colored tights do them no favors.

The polished dancing throughout the evening shows unstinting effort to give these new works a great send-off. Katherine Lawrence was especially noteworthy in her intoxicating duet with Michael Bearden in "White Noise," and as Ruud's nonconformist in "Trapped." She's been promoted to principal artist status for next year — good call.

Back to that salsa analogy: Once you've tasted the fresh stuff, it's easy to become addicted. Watching the "Innovations" program could have the same effect.

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Review • Ballet West's 'Innovations'

Ballet West's investment in its own pays off with a bracing "Innovations" evening of fresh choreography by four company members, along with the world premiere of an exciting new work by New York City choreographer Avichai Scher.

Where • Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center, 138 W. 300 South, Salt Lake City

When • Continues Wednesday through Saturday at 7:30 p.m.

Running time • Two hours 10 minutes

Tickets • \$50. Call 801-355-ARTS or visit arttix.com.