



Filipe Portugal
CHOREOGRAPHER

Tauwetter

Press Release

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Junior Ballett (Ballett Zürich): New Creations



Surimu Fukushi in Ben Van Cauwenbergh's 'Les Bourgeois'. Photo © Judith Schlosser

Opernhaus, Zürich, Switzerland; December 17, 2014

Maggie Foyer

The thirteen young dancers from the Junior Ballett had their own full-evening performance, the first of three, on the main stage at the Zürich Opera House. In line with many dance graduates their technical standards are very high but more interesting, and more important for a professional career, was their individualism and versatility.

The evening of mainly new works also revealed the choreographic talent emerging from the main company ranks. Dancer and ballet mistress Eva Dewaele choreographed "Passing By" and principal dancer, Filipe Portugal's ballet, "Tauwetter" formed the second act.

Two comedy favourites were a welcome addition. Ben Van Cauwenbergh's "Les Bourgeois" to Jacques Brel's song was the perfect vehicle for Surimu Fukushi's fearsome technique and comedy skills. His timing was spot on as he nailed every aerial manoeuvre with ease and his performance earned the roar of audience approval it deserved.

Itzik Galili's "Sofa" is another treat. Tom Waite's "Nobody" is a triangular search for love that delivers unexpected relationships. With the improbability of cartoon characters the trio flip, flop and fly over, behind and onto the yellow sofa. Michael Samuel Blaško is what you might call the 'straight' man of the three; pursuing first the feisty Clarissa Pace and then pursued by the racy Mackenzie Farquhar.



Clarissa Pace and Mackenzie Farquhar in 'The Sofa'.
Photo © Judith Schlosser

The broad physical comedy is underlined by the nuanced subtext as male, female, straight and gay, repeat the same choreography with each new context generating startling consequences. The comedy was played to perfection and delivered with professional élan. For those who think comedy doesn't travel consider this integrated fusion of Czech, Italian, and Canadian and think again!

Christian Spuck, director of Ballett Zürich, contributed, "Paysage Obscure", set to the intense adagio movement from Schubert's "String Quintet in C Major". It has his hallmark of taking the ballet vocabulary to the edge creating new forms that resonate with meaning. Ina Buschhaus' dark costumes encase the dancers' limbs with both men and women in wrapped in pleated skirts while the detail of tight skull caps and small, very dark glasses for the men added a direct inquisitive gaze. The cutting edge designs extend to Spuck's enigmatic set of a pile of discarded chairs

The dancers worked with serious intent to shape the movements. This same caring attitude was given to Dewaele's short piece, "Passing By". Also choreographed on demi-pointe but with a more evident classical base and coloured by a slight undercurrent of emotion as the dancers react to Glen Gabriel's score.



Lydia Bevan and Michael Samuel Blaško in 'Tauwetter' by Filipe Portugal.
Photo © Judith Schlosser

The focal work of the evening engaging the full company was “Tauwetter” by Portugal. He is a choreographic voice to get seriously excited about. The work is tooled with craftsman care in every detail. The movement is twenty-first century ballet: light, fluid pointe work, the extensions high but not overblown exploiting torsos that bend and arch freely. The structure is complex, the stage sectioned by gauzes that draw areas into shadow or silently part to reveal the dancers by degrees. In this constantly shifting landscape Portugal weaves his dancers with assured ease to create an intricate fabric of quality design.

The music is thoughtfully chosen: Philip Glass’ “The Secret Agent”, interspersed by Max Richter’s sounds of rain before warming to Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings”. Portugal shows sharp theatrical nous, so while the detail in each department is intense, the overall effect is cool and minimal. The young dancers responded magnificently, notably Keren Leiman, an interesting dancer of hidden depth who brought the work to a quiet, compelling close.

Ballett Zürich is a company in rude health as talented young artists rise to meet flourishing choreographic talent. The members of the Junior Ballett are seen regularly in company performances and each has the potential for a successful professional career: here’s hoping the finances permit.

“New Creations” – Junior Ballett Zurich in five-fold delights

By Sarah Batschelet, 22 February 2015

Founded in 2001, the Junior Ballet Zurich, made up of promising aspirant dancers, is the second of the city opera house's own dance company. Its current “New Creations” programme showcases this year's dancers – 13 juniors from 8 nations – who have all come to Zurich to gain stage performance experience within the conditions of a professional company. Not surprisingly, the “bloom of youth” was a terrific draw to audience members of all ages; for all I could see, there wasn't a single empty seat in the house.



Paysage Obscur © Judith Schlosser

The program began with a sensation that something had gone terribly wrong: there was a total blackout in the house. Then on the very first base chord of a striking “Passing By” by Glen Gabriel, the curtain went up to 7 dancers crisscrossing a brightly lit stage flanked by a dramatic backdrop of black 'hills' and mottled pink sky at the back of the stage. Eva Dawaele's choreography, set design and silvery costuming were breathtakingly beautiful from the start. A male duet became an all male trio, while the quartet of women entwined and overlapped one another, turning in to each other and sustaining their movements near one another like punctuation in a complex sentence. Every possible partnering configuration pulsed

energetically, but then ended quietly like something ethereal against a background of soft blue. Lighting designer Martin Gebhardt's work was simply brilliant.

Next was *Paysage Obscur*, choreographed by Zurich's own Christian Spuck, who also managed set design, and set to the second movement of Franz Schubert's String Quintet in C-major. Scored for two violins, a viola, and two cellos, this is the work that Arthur Rubenstein passionately called "the door to Heaven". As one of Schubert's last works before his untimely death at age 31, the music is widely read as a premonition of the composer's tragic fate. Spuck's piece begins with bodies slowly crawling out one by one or in small groups from a cluster of old wooden side chairs stacked at stage rear. The dancers' entirely black costumes (Ina Buschhaus) bear markings that resemble the carapaces of wood beetles. Indeed, larvae-like figures also crawl across the stage in a quartet of the lowly earth bound. But with the men's skullcaps and dervish-like twirls could also be sensed spiritual references that was both reverent and holy. Once, one stiff, solid formation moved only its many hands: a haunting apparition. But there was good humour, too, where dancers actually bumped one against another on the violin's' pizzicato, the implication being "off you go.. I'm here now"! And the work included some terrific knee and flexed feet constellations. Nothing, in fact, about the body's possibilities was too obtuse for Spuck, whose work is as demanding technically as it is theatrically.



Les Bourgeois © Judith Schlosser

There was more humour, though, in choreographer Ben Van Cauwenbergh's homage to the great French chansonnier, Jacques Brel. *Les Bourgeois* was masterfully performed by the young Japanese dancer, Surimu Fukushi. Dressed in a loose pair of black trousers, a white shirt and black tie, he was at ease on the stage as a pair of old house slippers, and captured Brel's character precisely. At the same time, he dazzled with jumps snapped out at the speed of light. Simply put, he was terrific in the role.

The Sofa (choreography by Itzik Galili on music by Tom Waits) also tickled a funny bone. The lyric's bottom line: "Nobody will ever love you the way I could" was picked up by boy-going-after-

girl. There was aggressive quarrelling, tossing and lunging of the two on a sofa first, but a simple head (his) to groin (hers), seemed to settle tempers quickly before she exited stage right. Then in exactly the same tireless approach as he had given her, the man himself was pursued by a handsome fellow, whose attention included another oral transgression. While more of an athletic and perfectly timed Marx-Brother-like sequence than serious ballet, the convertible sofa (Janco van Barneveldt, set design) was a clever invention, and the audience was smitten and highly amused. I confess I was, too.

Finally, *Tauwetter* was choreographed by Ballett Zürich's own principal dancer and promising young choreographer, Filipe Portugal. Studded with more classical elements than the other four dances, this work is on the threshold of expression; both tender and powerful. The stage is multileveled, its depth compromised, then expanded by the lowering and raising of transparent gauze sheeting. The music was a triple bill of selections by Philip Glass, Max Richter, and Samuel Barber, whose elegiacal "Adagio for Strings" is so closely associated with the tragedy of 9/11.



Tauwetter © Judith Schlosser

Portugal used all the thirteen dancers in generous constellations. Most interesting was his contrast between 'on-' and 'off stage' positions: anyone not in action simply stood, as if waiting casually on the side-lines to dance their parts. But it is just this formal/informal juxtaposition that mirrored the relationship between classical to more modern dance form. Ingenious, too, was the way bodies doubled as props or supports for the alternating soloists. For where a move might threaten a dancer's balance, another would momentarily offer a back to bend onto, a hand to give leverage, serving as ballast to extend the limits of physical possibility. As such, Philip Portugal's was a pointed exploration of what the merits of contemporary dance can well be. And in this context, the young American dancer Lydia Bevan should be commended for showing some of the very best technique of the genre.