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Stepping Over

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Divinity, Orgy, and Terror Are Excitingly Mixed into Charlotte Ballet's Spring Works

By [Perry Tannenbaum](#)

April 26, 2018 - Charlotte, NC:

Spring is always considered a season of growth and renewal, and at [Charlotte Ballet](#), where [Hope Muir](#) is completing her first year as artistic director; that old maxim was explosively confirmed on opening night of Ballet's Spring Works at [Knight Theater](#). Indications were strong that Muir and the company had turned a corner with the triumphant American premiere – after a one-night postponement – of [Javier de Frutos'](#) *The Most Incredible Thing* in early March, reaffirming that CharBallet could take on bigger challenges and fill anybody's shoes. The current sequel has brought in [Bryan Arias](#), [Helen Pickett](#), and [Filipe Portugal](#), three choreographers the company had never presented before, and a rousing reprise of [Ohad Naharin](#)'s masterful *Minus 16* suite.

The evening began with the splendid partnering of Alessandra Ball James and Josh Hall in Pickett's "Tsukiyo," premiered by Boston Ballet in 2009. Having watched *The Shape of Water* on a flight from Rome the previous morning, I saw a common thread between the Oscar-winning film and Pickett's pas de deux, which is set to Arvo Pärt's *Speigel im Speigel*. Both have the look of an amorous encounter between the human and the divine. James emerged from a mist like Botticelli's Venus, supremely elegant and graceful, radiating a regal and divine assurance. Hall approached her with worshipful awe, initially repulsed by the goddess; but he didn't flee, continuing to circle her with awestruck wonder. Somehow Hall, who is the title character of the piece (and a god) as far as I could determine, wasn't upstaged by James' perfection. After starring as Leo the Creator in *The Most Incredible Thing*, Hall may have given an even richer characterization here, often curving his body to a picture of humility, yet strong and worthy of the goddess in those few moments when she yielded to him. The chemistry was profound, meshing beautifully with the music. Costumes by Charles Heightchew and lighting by John Cuff enhanced the magic.

In the wake of this powerful intensity, the next two pieces, both in their world premiere presentations, were comparatively abstract. Set to generous selections from the "Tirol Concerto" by Philip Glass, Portugal's "Stepping Over" shuttled from fast to slow and back to fast in classic style. Action, divided among eight couples, was lively in the fast sections, most effectively in the final movement, where the music has a ragtime flavor. But I most enjoyed the slower middle movement with its style and grace. Costume design by Christopher J. Parker detracted from the overall impression, barely transcending workout togs, matching blue outfits for the three lead couples and teal for the others. Hall and James made fairly quick costume changes into blue, each taking on a new partner, Chelsea Dumas and Drew Grant respectively, but it was hard for me to take my eyes off Sarah Hayes Harkins. Eclipsed and maybe a little enervated for much of the 2017-18 season, Harkins regained all her old sparkle and precision paired with James Kopecky, dancing with a new joy and rejuvenated spirit. An impressive North American debut for Portugal.

The only true intermission came after "Stepping Over," though the program booklet deceptively places another one after the world premiere of "When Breath Becomes Air" by Arias. With more time devoted to ensemble movement, dancers were more detached and impersonal in the Arias piece than in the Pickett. Yet there was something more conceptual going on, since Arias has set his dance to *Six Breaths* by Ezio Bosso. As his title hints, part of Arias's intent was to give physical shape to the invisible. All-white costumes by Márian Tatán heightened the molecular quality of the ensemble's motion. Arias seemed to break away from that mold in the midsections of the piece, breaking down his ensemble into four different couples. Perhaps because these couples came on an evening that was already highlighted by the exploits of James and Hall, I was more enchanted by the trio of Colby Foss, Lexi Johnston, and Harkins.

Lights come up at Knight Theater after the Arias piece and the curtain comes down, but you shouldn't leave the hall. Naharin's piece explores the sometimes ambiguous borderlines between playfulness and madness in a society under constant threat of terrorism. The most famous part of the Israeli choreographer's *Minus 16* is where he sets the [Tractor's Revenge](#) modernization of a Passover song for a tightly regimented group of dancers who curve from one side of the stage to the other, mostly sitting and moving on chairs as "Echad Mi Yode'a" cycles from one to thirteen in much the same fashion as "The Twelve Days of Christmas." Naharin brought this part of the piece to the Carolinas when his Batseva Dance Company made its Spoleto Festival USA debut in 2007. But the first complete performances of the suite in the Carolinas came at Knight Theater in 2012 when the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre brought it to town in 2012 – on their way to presenting it at Spoleto. Charlotte Ballet latched onto the piece in 2016 with smashing success.

The encore presentation seemed even better. While the lights were up for "Intermission," Kopecky came out for his solo, a potpourri of spasmodic, graceful, and

EVENT INFORMATION

Charlotte -- (Thu., Apr. 26, 2018 - Sat., Apr. 28, 2018)

[Charlotte Ballet: Spring Works](#)

Tickets start at \$25 -- Knight Theatre , (704) 335-1010 ,

<http://charlotteballet.org>