

Review: Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal Blends Jazz, Modern and Classical Dance

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My love of dance started at a very early age while listening to Celia Cruz and dancing to her music. As a teenager in the 1970's, there were the quinceañeras and debutant balls I participated in the Cuban/Latin community of Los Angeles. These dance events in particular were not just social activities but a way to learn about popular Latin and classical music while teaching you how to dance a waltz, a danzon as well as the latest popular dance moves.

It was also during the 1970's that I got the "ballet bug" watching American Ballet Theater in their golden age with such legendary performers as Russians Mikhail Baryshnikov, Natalia Makarova, and Alexander Godunov, Cuban-American Fernando Bujones, Americans Gelsey Kirkland, Cynthia Gregory and so many more. The venue of choice at the time was the iconic Shrine Auditorium, an architectural jewel that boasts the largest stage in Los Angeles and one of the largest seating capacity.

On the Westside of Los Angeles we are beginning to see more performance spaces such as The Broad Stage in Santa Monica and now The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts (The Wallis) in Beverly Hills to accommodate more dance, music and other performing arts.

The Wallis' first season is on its way and it offers dance in several programs, including Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal for two nights on Friday, January 10 & Saturday, January 11.

Headed by Louis Robitaille since 1998, Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal has evolved from its Jazz music roots in 1972 to a more contemporary dance company that has teamed up with some of today's most important choreographers such as French born Benjamin Millepied, Chinese/Canadian Wen Wei Wang and Angelino/Israeli Barak Marshall.

The first half of the program began with Millepied's haunting duet "The Closer" danced by the hugely talented Céline Cassone and her partner Alexander Hille. Cassone is a diminutive dancer but has a huge stage presence with incredible leg extensions, supple arms and passionate delivery. Hille proves to be a perfect partner for the role with his great strength and timing while lifting, moving and presenting Cassone in this very sensual and passionate performance set to Philip Glass' "Mad Rush" piano piece.

This is a love story with all its ups and downs effectively portrayed by the dancers with their bodies interweaving in either sensuality and love or to the more anxious portrayal of conflict. Glass' repetitive score alternates between slow and rapid paces with intermittent pauses, while the background lighting changes from bold blue to a gray tone in order to accentuate the dancers' distraught emotional state. Millepied uses both classical and contemporary dance language to great success in this beautifully performed piece.

Second on the program was Wang's energy charged "Night Box" about urban life, its sounds and young inhabitants. Black and white rear projections of city aerial shots and streets set the context while club style music set the tone for this ensemble piece.

The movements by the dancers were a mix of street, club and contemporary dance moves as a way of telling the story of urban youth in multiple scenes and pairings. There is an underground carefree feeling in many of the group's movements while in others like the human line formation were more unison and controlled.

Sex and sexuality are some of the topics explored as a woman is passed around in the air by the male dancers. In another scene, couples dance sensually in unison while wondering hands press on buttocks alternating on both genders. Exceptional work by the ensemble but specifically Christian Denise, a standout in the group.

After the intermission came the longest and last performance of the evening, "Harry" by Marshall. It is an interesting, unique ensemble piece that incorporates a story line with dialogue by the dancers and a eclectic score that goes from Tommy Dorsey & The Andrew Sisters doing swing/jazz to Israeli folk songs.

This is another love story, where Harry is searching for the woman of his life but none of the lids carried by the women fits perfectly with the pot he carries around till he meets "the one" and then the pieces come together. In the meantime, he faces the whims of Greek gods, wars and existential questions about death.

Marshall's work is earthy, traditional and contemporary at the same time with a physicalness that makes it exciting albeit at times confusing to the audience. The movements are close to the ground and include something as simple as coordinated hand movements by a group of the female dancers while seated. His piece was the favorite amongst the capacity crowd on Friday night.

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