

Fickle Nature, Taunting an Ensemble From the North

By BRIAN SEIBERT

New York Times

August 2, 2013

Last year, when Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal was scheduled to perform in New York, Hurricane Sandy intervened. That run was rescheduled and went off without meteorological incident. But when the company returned on Thursday for a Celebrate Brooklyn! show under the Prospect Park Bandshell, the heavens opened up again.

The sparse group of spectators not already deterred by the rain waited under umbrellas as it seemed that the mopping of the stage might be the only dance. Yet the show did go on, eventually, with the rain diminishing to a drizzle through the 90-minute program's first two pieces and stopping altogether by the third and last.

The performance opened with "Closer," a 2006 Benjamin Millepied duet danced by Alexander Hille and Céline Cassone, who draws the eye with her fiery hair and holds that focus with the clarity of her technique. Set to Philip Glass's "Mad Rush," which alternates between quiet rippling and torrential variations, the piece attends less to those dynamic contrasts than to the pauses between them, intermittently suggesting a couple hesitant to come together.

The work's partnering, in its deft fluidity, has the odd effect of seeming more repetitive than it is. Only a few moments stick: the angle of the woman's bent leg, hitched up high; the way the man sometimes drags her like a sailor pulling against a full sail. When the two dancers sit entwined at the end, the actual repetitions of this cool dance become almost tender.

"Night Box," a protracted ensemble piece by the Chinese-Canadian choreographer Wen Wei Wang, is a sillier affair. To express urban night life, Mr. Wang has the dancers throb in clumps to throbbing music. More promising sections soon dissipate, but what's most interesting is how many of the duets and trios are framed by group activity — more clumping or centipedelike processions — that succeed in distracting from what would normally be the focal point (for example, Ms. Cassone).

It's also interesting how the ensemble's rhythmic isolation of body parts in "Night Box," though corny, hints at the company's past as a jazz troupe. Much of the rest of the work's choreography represents the company's current identity: often indistinguishable from other skilled and sleek contemporary troupes.

"Harry," by the Israeli-American choreographer Barak Marshall, hints at that jazz past, too, with bits of Yiddish jazz ("Bei Mir Bist du Schön") next to Balkan tracks. And Mr. Marshall's ensemble movement, low to the ground with rhythmically mimed gesture, has an eccentricity this company can use.

The work spirals around a Cinderella story, in which Harry (Youri de Wilde) has a pot to which only an unnamed woman (Ms. Cassone) has the right-size lid. When they meet, their gestures fit, too. But in trying also to incorporate commentary about false glory in war, the battle of the sexes and the fickleness of the gods, the piece gets jumbled.

Its central scene, to which it returns time and again, is Harry's funeral, his funeral in the rain. On Thursday, the recorded thunder had the sound of irony, since the rain in Brooklyn had stopped just before it might have been helpful. What do the gods of New York have against these visitors from the north?

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/03/arts/dance/les-ballets-jazz-de-montreal-performs-at-celebrate-brooklyn.html?_r=0