

Lines Ballet review: New work reunites Alonzo King, Zakir Hussain

By Allan Ulrich / November 17, 2014

[Alonzo King's Lines Ballet](#) spans seven years in the career of a unique artist during its fall season concert, which opened on a wave of triumphant dancing Friday evening at the [Yerba Buena Center](#) for the [Arts Theater](#).

A revival of King's 2007 "Rasa" follows the world premiere of "Shostakovich," a 30-minute full-company essay that plunders four of the late Russian master's string quartets for isolated movements. "Rasa," a signal event for King's company, reunited the choreographer with the great Indian tabla master [Zakir Hussain](#), whose score propels the dance into a state of near ecstasy.

Remarkably, in the past few years, the company roster has turned over almost completely. We're seeing a whole new generation of dancers, three of whom are in their debut seasons. How King transforms dancers into exponents of his unique classical vision remains a wonder, but it was revealing to see [Laura O'Malley](#), most recently with Post:Ballet, testing her balances and dramatically extending her limbs like a Lines veteran. New, too, is [Shuaib Elhassan](#), whose gentle attack provides a contrast to the ferocity surrounding him.

"Shostakovich" begins with feral solos for the 10 dancers who work their legs, pump their arms, rise on demi-pointe, and spin on bent legs, an arrangement that also closes the work. The bathing suit costumes and Robert Rosenwasser's decor of upturned trees suggest a state of nature, but the duets that make up the center of the ballet make it seem rather tooth and claw.

King has chosen movements that seem saturated in despair, with hope coming from the exquisite violin solo drawn from the String Quartet No. 2. He seems less drawn to the structure of the music; the obsessive three-note motive in the 8th is barely acknowledged.

Still, the dancer pairings yield spectacular partnerings, like the testing exchange for [Robb Beresford](#) and [Kara Wilkes](#) or the sweeter byplay for O'Malley and [Michael Montgomery](#). [Courtney Henry](#) is her customary amazing self, cantilevering into her famous 6 o'clock position without a flicker of a transition.

"Shostakovich" falters midway when dancer Babatunji enters toting a huge light saber, which seems momentarily to arouse the other men. The meaning of this prop, with its "Star Wars" connotations, is elusive; the force was not with King in this case.

After intermission, Hussain and violinist [Kala Ramnath](#) slipped into the pit, lending their magnificent authority to "Rasa," that breathtaking fusion of Indian dance and King-style

classicism. There's a feeling of ritual afoot in this nine-part suite, and the choreography explores the upper body for its plasticity and vulnerability in a way that more recent King pieces do not.

The dynamic is wider here, too. Dancers gently slip into deep pli  and linger there. They roll on the floor (the finale of "Rasa" must be unique in King's output), and they succumb to the dazzling rhythmic foundation of the music. Watching Babatunji and especially Jeffrey Van Sciver reflect the dazzling velocity of Hussain's vocalizations and declamation in every flick of the wrist and twist of the ankle is something you don't forget.

In short, "Shostakovich" is a good King ballet. "Rasa" is a career maker. Not to be missed.

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