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BALLET (USA & CANADA), REVIEWS

MOVE: the company at The Joyce Ballet Festival

The Joyce
Theater, New
York, NY
August 4,
2015

Jerry
Hochman

The two-week
summer 2015
Joyce Ballet
Festival began
with the first
of two
performances
by Canadian-
born dancer

and contemporary ballet choreographer Joshua Beamish's MOVE: the company.

Beamish is one of ballet's choreographers du jour – a post-up-and-coming but not quite household name who is virtually ubiquitous, having presented *Conditional Sentences* in Wendy Whelan's *Restless Creatures* program in May (also at the Joyce), his company's tenth anniversary performance in Vancouver, a world premiere at the Fire Island Dance Festival last month, and *Rouge et Noir* (reportedly an homage to the Ballet Russes) for the Ashley Boudier Project at this same Joyce Festival; and he gets to work with some of the finest dancers in the world.

Of the pieces danced here, *Stay* and *Surface Properties* have more interest than the others, but each was skillfully crafted and superbly executed.



Joshua Beamish's *Burrow*
(dancers here: Nicol Edmonds, Matthew Ball)
Photo Alice Pennefather

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Surface Properties (here receiving its world premiere) is the only work that is purely abstract, and that involves more than a pair of dancers. Featuring smashing black and lime green costumes by former New York City Ballet principal Janie Taylor and visual design by Matt Keegan consisting of an ever-changing cacophony of projected rectangles and circles moving to the beat of music that sounded at times like an erratic metronome, the piece is light, airy, fun, and delightful to watch; and of no consequence whatsoever except for Beamish's stagecraft and seeing ten extraordinary dancers (all American Ballet Theatre soloists or corps members) having a blast.

Like the shapes projected on the backstage curtain, the dance is a kaleidoscope of figures and forms. No corner of the stage is left unused, and no section of it remains the same for very long. The piece segues from women to men to subset combinations, the changing patterns flowing seamlessly from group to group, from trio to duet, from downstage right to upstage left and back. At times, dancers border the sides of the stage while others are the focus of attention. While the tempo may change as the piece deconstructs into several distinctive, though not necessarily thematic, pairings, the movement never stops. If it wasn't so well staged, it would look dizzying, but it never looks busy. In visual impact (though not at all in style, and not nearly as panoramic), it reminded me of Justin Peck's *Year of the Rabbit* for NYCB.

Beamish's choreographic style is relatively unusual, but not so far from the balletic norm that it looks like a completely new language. He focuses on thrusting arms and legs, a core that flexes when it's not ballet-rigid, and use of the head as both an object to reach out to and a fulcrum on which to maneuver.

Although the dancers in *Surface Properties* are largely part of group subsets, each is highlighted to one degree or another. Particularly noteworthy were newly promoted ABT soloists Luciana Paris and Cassandra Trenary, and corps members Stephanie Williams and Sterling Baca, who are on track to join them soon. Trenary in particular ignites the stage, not only with impeccable technique (including Beamish's vertebrae-challenging back swivels and weaves, and those dynamic, thrusting legs) but with an arresting vibrancy and kittenish sensuality. Roman Zhurbin, usually seen only in character roles, was a revelation in his duets with Isadora Loyola, as well as on his own.

Stay, which premiered at Fire Island (NY) last month, is a duet for Williams, a dancer of compelling presence and technical clarity, and Dimitri Kleioris, until recently with the Royal New Zealand Ballet.

The theme of an enamored couple unwilling to part but knowing that they must is a component of virtually every adult-oriented story ballet and countless stand-alone pas de deux, but Beamish's choreography, and the dancers' execution of it, make it look fresh and different. While choreographic trademarks are present in *Stay*, they're not dominant. Instead, the whole is a relatively novel-looking visualization of a couple not wanting to separate. The choreography is complex and at times artificial-looking, but

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the passion, the resolve, and the heartbreak seethe from within. And the concluding image of Kleioris rotating Williams as she stands en pointe (think the climax of the pas de deux in Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*), but holding her horizontally extended working leg as she bends backward as if she was being pulled away by some centrifugal force to which neither is willing to yield, is stunning. Both dancers were superb, but Williams particularly so. Her face tells stories without moving a muscle.

The individually titled excerpts from *Pierced* that opened the program are curious. The complete ballet was created in segments at different times. First shown was *Little Eye*, a solo for Beamish that premiered in January, 2012. This was followed by *Pierced* (titled the same as the complete work), danced exquisitely by Paris and Baca, that premiered the following July.

In his movement soliloquy, Beamish is fiercely independent, but also empty. His position – squatting or otherwise close to the floor – and body contortions at times made him look insect-like, but every twitch is programmed and controlled. The final image of this strong, proud, armored character wiping away a tear, the emotional background of which is unknown but which permeates the piece, appears as a no longer containable and almost shocking revelation.

The title, *Pierced*, telegraphs Beamish's choreographic intent; the duet appearing to concern how emotions pierce the heart. Paris and Baca, she in a black leotard with mesh cutouts and he shirtless, have an apparent cat and mouse, parry and thrust sexual encounter, with Paris being the somewhat dominant force. Their emotional attraction attempts to distance themselves from each other, ultimate acceptance of being pierced by the other being conveyed by riveting choreographic angles and thrusts. The closing image of Baca, alone on the stage floor in emotional submission, slowly arching his back until his head almost, but not quite hits the floor, is extraordinary. Though the choreography may be somewhat academic, Beamish knows how to end a piece.

Burrow, which premiered in London in January, might just as well have been another component of *Pieces*. An emotionally complex and intimate romantic duet between two men is rare enough, but here the emotions of each dancer, Matthew Dibble and Sebastian, are exposed and raw; and not just because each is bare-chested. The relationship burrows into each man's psyche. Nevertheless, like the two components of *Pieces*, there's a distance to it – not from the dancers to each other, but from them to the audience – that makes the piece less accessible than it should be.

Overall, this was an interesting and brilliantly danced program – a fine beginning to the Joyce Festival.

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