

Review: Company C adds some Tharp to the mix for season-closing performances

By Robert Taylor
Correspondent

Posted: 05/10/2010 04:25:48 PM PDT

Updated: 05/11/2010 10:01:28 AM PDT

Company C Contemporary Ballet its closing its sixth season with as much contrast as a single stage can hold: the premiere of a ballet-and-ballroom romance set to Chet Baker's poignant jazz classics and the first performance outside Twyla Tharp's dance company of her no-holds-barred bacchanal, "Surfer at the River Styx." No wonder a recent cover story in Dance magazine touted Company C among "25 to watch" dance troupes and performers across the country considered "2010's showstoppers." The 12-member company performed last weekend at San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts Theatre, and it brings the same program (including Val Caniparoli's delightful "boink!") to the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Artistic director and choreographer Charles Anderson was inspired the first time he heard a recording of Baker's moody, ethereal singing and his trumpet playing.

He teased audiences last season with "You Don't Know What Love Is," set to one of Baker's recordings. Now he fills out the program with five more Baker vocals and an instrumental counterpoint

to the melancholy mood.

The completed work, "Beautiful Maladies," traces the arc of a relationship with two couples, the women wearing glittering tops, flowing skirts and elbow-length satin gloves in red and blue that almost make their arms and hands another character.

Ashley Ivory paired with Mario Espinoza, and Aubrey Morgan with Aaron Jackson, deftly

characterized meetings and playful seductions, conflict and anguish, separation and sympathy.

Ivory and Espinoza were lightly athletic, almost giddy, in "I Fall in Love Too Easily." Jackson, astonishingly flexible, wrapped himself around Baker's most famous vocal performance, "My Funny Valentine." Later, Morgan stepped out of a circle of light and into the darkness to close "I Get Along Without You Very Well." Like Baker's performance of these classics from the American songbook, the dancers suggested poignancy but not romantic tragedy as they eased toward the final curtain. "You Don't Know What Love Is," brought them all together to look over their shoulders, console each other and move on.

"Surfer at the River Styx" is the fifth work entrusted to the Walnut Creek-based company by the Twyla Tharp organization, which demands excellence long before the curtain goes up. Based loosely on Euripides' "The Bacchae," it premiered in 2000 and was staged for Company C by Benjamin G. Bowman.

It feels both ancient and modern, with physical stances ranging from wall frieze to hip-hop and karate kicks, in a jagged athletic style set to a pounding, percussive score by Donald Knaack and David Kahne. Before the San Francisco opening, Anderson privately called it "28 minutes of kick-ass

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

ContraCostaTimes.com

dancing." Amazingly, six dancers suggest a small army in this fast-moving ritual: Espinoza, Jackson, and Taurean Green, Edilsa Armendariz, Kristin Lindsay and Peter Snow. They're all over the stage, spinning and diving, leaping in place, kicking and jabbing to convey this stunning, mysterious celebration.

"Boink!," which closed the program with the entire company, might be considered a comic bookend to "Beautiful Maladies." Caniparoli's choreography (originally for the Lawrence Pech Dance Company) offers a succession of mostly jaunty performers dancing to Juan Garcia Esquivel's arrangements of "space-age bachelor pad music." There are cocktail-party ensembles, wolf-whistles, a taunting "Mucha Muchacha" and some mock-seductions. At times, dancers recalled the all-purpose, all-smiling troupes in so many TV variety shows of the 1950s and '60s.

But you can't help smiling, even laughing out loud, when "The Boulevard of Broken Dreams" is tossed off with a Latin beat, complete with cheerful vocal punctuation, "cha-cha-cha!"

dance review

WHO: Company C Contemporary Ballet

WHAT: Works by Anderson, Tharp and Caniparoli

WHERE: Leshner Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic, Walnut Creek

WHEN: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday

HOW MUCH: \$18-\$40

CONTACT: 925-943-7469, www.LeshnerArtsCenter.org