

Bravo, Raising the Barre indeed **The Houston Ballet showcases fresh faces and new works**

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Some dynamic ballerinas leapt, spun, bourréeed, swiveled their hips, did cartwheels, slid and electric boogaloo-ed into the spotlight Thursday.

Houston Ballet's Raising the Barre program lives up to its title by adding three exciting works to the repertoire.

Jorma Elo's delightful *One/end/One* (a world premiere) and Christopher Wheeldon's elegant *Rush* (a company premiere) load kinetically charged surprises into classical form and structure. They accompanied the American premiere of Christopher Bruce's poetic *Grinning in Your Face*, created a decade ago for London's Rambert Dance Company and overdue on this side of the Atlantic, where it belongs.

The opening-night casts were excellent, propelled with swift energy through the live music by conductor Ermanno Florio and the Houston Ballet Orchestra. *One/end/One* riffs on Mozart's *Violin Concerto No. 4 in D Major*, and *Rush* springs from Bohuslav Martinu's complex *Sinfonietta la Jolla*. *Grinning in Your Face*, like much of Bruce's work, uses a recorded score; in this case, Martin Simpson's 1983 folk album of the same name.

The program feels like a coming-out party for ballerinas Karina Gonzalez, Melissa Hough and Danielle Rowe, all of whom joined the company this season. They're like Ferraris newly outfitted with the right wheels. Wonderful Jessica Collado and Melody Mennite (formerly Herrera) are right there with them.

One/end/One cleverly references classics but also conjures something fresh. The title and the ballet reflect the music's three sections — an allegro, an adagio and a rondeau. If you're really paying attention, you might also see the score's cadenzas (unaccompanied violin solos) in the brief "/" sections - danced in silence.

The dancing is athletic but not overtly showy, even when Hough pirouettes holding her leg up to her ear. It's also cheeky: You have to chuckle as she rushes across the stage and slides into place, flat footed in her pointe shoes, like a kid surfing a slick floor. Or when ballerinas are dragged, cheerfully, with their legs bicycling. It's like Elo has brought his dancers' subconscious urges to the surface.

His quicksilver choreography demands extreme technical virtuosity: His steps can snap instantly from pure classical silhouettes into sharp-edged or wavy business - or do both at

once, in different parts of the body. Thursday's confident cast of eight ate it up, and I look forward to watching them absorb Elo's style even more with additional performances.

The men are challenged as much as the women. What kind of choreographer makes a guy strike an arabesque while he's lunged forward, dipping his partner? This occurs during the central pas de deux for Gonzalez and Connor Walsh. They dance with youthful romanticism and a hint of longing. At the end, as Gonzalez wafts offstage into darkness, Walsh slumps forward then jerks out of it a few times; such simple moves, but so evocative. His face is blank, not melancholy; the movement says it all.

Holly Hynes' beautiful black-and-gold costumes, including smallish tutus, complement the choreography; Christina Giannelli's lighting shows them off well and evokes nice moods. My slight complaint: The strings, including featured violinist Denise Tarrant, sounded coarse.

The orchestra, however, brought crisp color to the Martinu score for Rush - the night's biggest dance with a corps of 10, four soloists and two principals.

George Balanchine's influence shows in this piece created in 2003 for San Francisco Ballet, but Wheeldon is no copycat. The ballet's lifts, especially, are dazzling and inventive; and though the steps don't look hurried, the heart quickens each time the ballerinas jump into sharp poses in their partners' arms.

Rush, too, has an elegant central pas de deux between brighter, adrenalin-driven sections. Rowe and Simon Ball, wonderful together, danced it with dreamy quietude; Gonzalez, Hough, Joseph Walsh and Connor Walsh lit up the solo sections.

John Morrell's colorful costumes are gorgeous, with deeply slit bodices crossed by contrasting satin bands that mimic the hazy line of a Rothko-like backdrop incredibly lit by Mark Stanley.

Collado was captivating as the downtrodden lead woman in Grinning in Your Face, a ballet that reminds one why narrative humanism still matters. Bruce efficiently turns more than a half-dozen of Simpson's renderings of traditional folk songs (including It Doesn't Matter Anymore, Little Birdie, Reuben's Train and Masters of War) into an earthy dreamworld fraught with early- and mid-20th-century American menaces - the poverty of the Great Depression, racism and war - as well as timeless boy-loves-hurts-girl themes. Think Sergeant Early's Dream meets the Dust Bowl with a hint of Ghost Dances' edge.

An especially memorable dance for the men involves a beating but sets the victim halfway across the stage from his tormenters. Connor Walsh lets his slick side shine as the protagonist of Roving Gambler, and Ian Casady is irresistibly smooth as a toe-tapping ladies' man.

All in all, it was a night of keepers I'd happily see again, soon.