



DANCE

# *Salad*

in Houston

MAGGIE FOYER visits a unique  
festival of bite-sized dance



**D**ance Salad is pretty unique among dance festivals, not least because it brings alternative, cutting edge dance to Texas. The other big event in Houston that week was the Rodeo! Dance Salad has the quirky charms of a personal collection, probably because the deciding factor in selection is whether director Nancy Henderik finds it special. It is also different in that the companies do not have separate programmes but share the bill; like the ubiquitous salad, works are trimmed and tossed in the same bowl. Henderik works with the choreographers to adapt extracts from their works to fit the programmes. The resulting programmes successfully mirrored the fabulous talent and diversity on offer in today's dance world.

Amongst the larger groups were the National Theatre Ballet of Prague, National Ballet of Canada and Beijing LDTX Modern Dance Company. The Czechs presented three tailored items. In *Stomping Ground* they showed their affinity with Kylián's choreography. He has given many of his ballets to the company and the dancers revelled in the humour and technical challenges. Although only NDT seem to have those spines of boneless fluidity, Suzana Simáková was almost there. *Among the Mountains*, choreographed by director Petr Zuška to Czech folk music, had a rich humanist vein running through it. Rituals of life and death, love and separation were danced with sincerity and passion. The gender roles were sharply defined in this company of powerful men and lithe nimble footed women. This definition made *Mania's Dream* all the more effective. City-suited Nikolo Márová, on neat black pointes, falls asleep on a park bench to find her dream peopled by four hunky men in ballet skirts – a far cry from Taglioni's sylph. However, between gymnastics on the bench and virtuosic steps, they obligingly assemble for iconic *Pas de quatre* moments. The choreography was clever and very, very funny. Drama was added on the last night when Lubor Kvacek limped off with a tendon injury. By sheer good luck Olexander Kysil was watching in the wings. He ripped off his street clothes, whipped

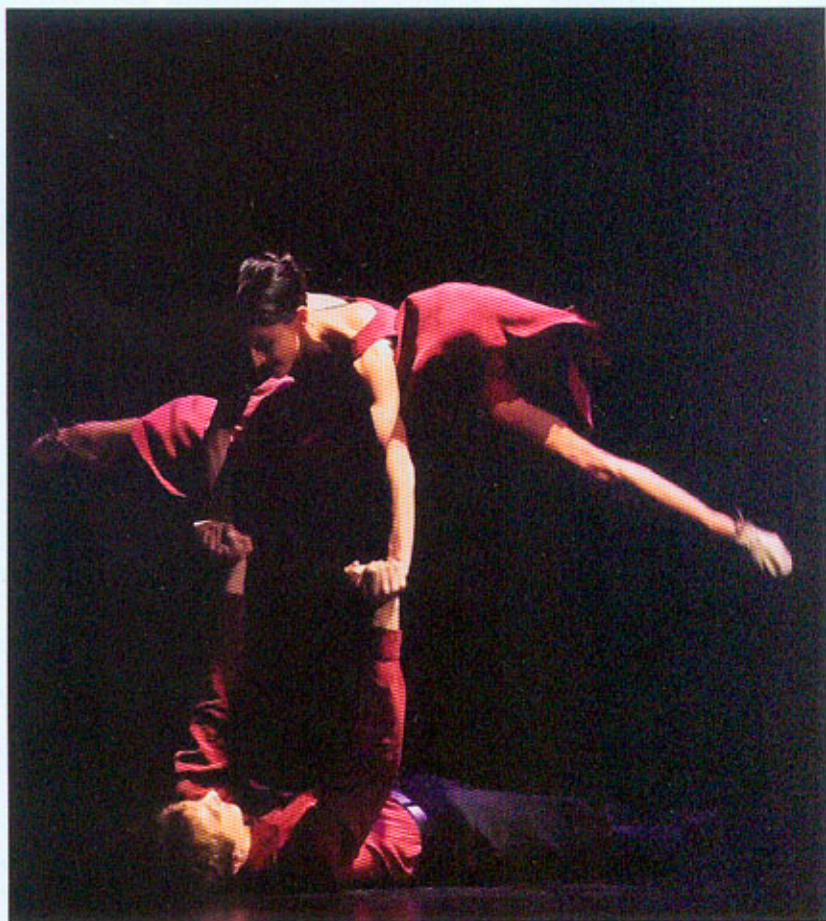
on the skirt and was on stage with hardly a beat missed; great company coordination.

The Chinese Beijing LTDX Modern Dance Company's *Cold Dagger* choreographed by Li Han-zhong and Ma Bo seems to herald the coming of age of new Chinese dance. It showed a highly individual style, tough and athletic with hints of martial arts interspersed with moments of concentrated stillness and fluid lyricism. The company worked in close harmony both in the silences and to David Darling's strident cello chords. Rituals of conflict in poetic slow motion evolve illuminated by visual pictures, like the pools of lacy black costumes on the white squares. The strength of the four men seemingly pitted against a tiny girl-figure culminating with her sinking on a bed of bodies that lowers her to the floor. It is a power play – maintaining the balance between the individual and the collective that has an extraordinary resolution as the floor is tunnelled under and the squares of taekwon do matting are peeled apart. It is a deep and fulfilling work that would repay endless viewings.

Rubinald Rofino Pronk, formerly of Dutch National, has one of those bodies: think da Vinci's model, elongate, add hyper-flexibility, fab feet and tensile strength. If that weren't enough he has found a soul-mate of matching physical splendour in Drew Jacoby, who displays feline grace on girders of steel. Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's duet, *One*, was a great idea. It relates to Aristophanes' myth of the co-joined male/female creature split by Zeus into two individuals who constantly long to be reunited. It established a friction that coloured the neoclassical movements with meaning. From Hamburg Ballet, Yaroslav Invaneko's *Ne m'oubliez pas* danced with Hélène Bouchet was the perfect counterbalance; lyrical and tender, the subtly judged moments of tension finding perfect resolution, leaving a sigh of contentment in its wake, not least for Bouchet's feet which are pure poetry. The third duet Benvindo Fonseca's *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* was less successful; an unobtrusive highjacking of Lorca's compelling play. Two fine dancers, Soraya Bruno and Martin Buczkó, played the characters as giggling adolescents, although their technical ability delighted the audience.

The National Ballet of Canada had a bad opening with *Polyphonia* when a serious malfunction in the first movement of Györgi Ligeti's fiendishly difficult music set the dancers adrift. Fortunately at second showing pianist Andrew Burashko was in confident form and the company showed what they were capable of, giving edge to Christopher Wheeldon's awkward freeze-frame moments and displayed quality technique in the duets. Xiao Nan Yu was particularly eloquent, giving a gentle and very human edge to her steely technique, while Zdenek Konvalina was sensational, finding perfect focus to the movements even while hovering in the air.

One of the most interesting and unusual artists was Makoto Matsushima. His *Invisible City*, more theatre than dance, was spellbinding, showing an acute perception of human foibles. Marcin Krajewski



National Theatre Ballet Prague in Petr Zúška's *Among the Mountains*. Photo: Diana Zehetner

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from Poland had the crowd roaring. A seriously good dancer in a comic role he gave a cracking airborne interpretation of 'drunk and disorderly' in Ben Van Cauwenbergh's *Les Bourgeois*.

A member of the audience came up to me in the interval; 'but is it dance?' he demanded. We had just watched Kylián's silent movie pastiche *Car Men*. My inner thoughts were, 'it's so bloody marvellous, do I care?' However I reflected and said probably it bordered on physical theatre and needed good dancers to make it work. It was wonderful to see it on a big screen where every nuance was visible. The film stars of *Paradox On*, formed from NDT3, also brought Kylián's *Birth-day*. Part film, part stage performance, it peppers Mozart's well known melodies with sexy spice, kitchen sauce and movingly honest moments. It was an inspiration to the younger dancers and the audience to have artists of the calibre of Sabine Kupferberg, Egon Madsen and Gérard Lemaître demonstrating the potency of a look and a gesture. Together with Giaconda Barbuto and David Krügel, they were a riot. The giant screen again revealed the master touch. Kupferberg's elegiac soliloquy with the shard of mirror has all the poignancy of departing youth then, just as maudlin emotions rise, her little moustache appears. The moment turns on its head and we are into the kitchen in company with Kupferberg and Lemaître moustached, corseted and unbelievably funny.

Dancers and directors are so often so busy that they seldom get to see performances outside of their own companies. At Dance Salad they share programmes and classes. Henderek purposely throws them in together in a company class where different styles and levels are soon accommodated, shared and enjoyed. She said there is always good feedback on the networking spinoffs of opening horizons and new contacts. It all proves... salads are good for dancers.