
Review:
Houston Ballet Ben Stevenson Academy Showcase



A Time to Dance
Choreographer: Stanton Welch
Dancer(s): Artists of Houston Ballet II
Photographer: Paul Swen

by Nichelle Strezpek
Cullen Theatre, Wortham Theatre Center

The dancers of Houston Ballet II were highlighted last weekend at Houston Ballet's Ben Stevenson Academy Spring Showcase. The group includes 19 dancers (18 of whom performed in the showcase) from the Academy's pre-professional training division. They hail from the U.S., Mexico, Argentina, China, Brazil, Chile, and Japan, and are evidence of the strong program helmed by Associate Director Shelly Power and implemented by Ballet Master Claudio Muñoz, and the Academy's exemplary artistic staff. Though the company, all young dancers between the ages of 16 and 20, has toured this year alone to Budapest, Japan, Wisconsin, Louisiana and Switzerland, this performance was an opportunity to present a full-evening's concert on their home turf.

Showing off their classical chops, the pre-professional company as well as some of the Academy's Level 8 students, performed Muñoz's staging of *Paquita*. It's a spicy little number as classical ballets go and, though the technical challenges of this piece were evident, the dancers performed well. Also included in Saturday's matinee performance was an excerpt of *Flames of Paris*. Its pas de deux showcased the talents of Madison Morris, a local dancer from The Woodlands, and Sebastian Concha, a recent prizewinner at the Prix de Lausanne Dance Competition. Concha has been dancing only five years, three of which he's spent at Houston Ballet's Academy, and shows impressive virtuosity for such a relative newcomer to dance.

Garrett Smith, a Houston Ballet II dancer and burgeoning choreographer, premiered *Of Opposing Nature*, his fourth work for the company. Composer Derek Zhao's musical contribution was refreshing in its originality though chosen selections by Beethoven and Vivaldi have been utilized in one dance

production (or perhaps car commercial) too many. Though Smith's work would have benefited from the use of other less-recognizable tunes, his choreography was unique with an appealing unpredictability. The dancers slid and skidded along the floor, carving through the space with large, dynamic movements, and then a flick of the wrist, a moment of measured restraint or stillness, swiftly changed the mood. An unusual costume device utilized by the five male dancers featured fabric extended at the neck like a scarf. Whether stretched over the face or ferociously wiggled, its use illustrated Smith's creativity and willingness to take risks. He is off to a solid start as a maker of dances.

The production high point was Stanton Welch's *A Time to Dance*, a youthful romp with which the troupe seemed more at ease. The choreography, originally created for a touring ensemble of The Australian Ballet, is a nice mix of character dance and classical styling. Certainly the troupe could not help but have a good time as they raced along with the music, tossed dancers into the air, flirted, and frolicked. Their strong and exuberant performance was exciting and a clear indication of the bright futures that await these young apprentices.

Though work presented by Houston Ballet II was quite enough to fill an evening of performance, Welch's *Studies*, a tradition of this showcase since 2005, completed the presentation. Some of the Academy's youngest ballet students had their moment in the spotlight beside soon-to-be graduates. In addition to this "Awww" factor, the piece offered a chance to glimpse the progression of all eight levels of the Academy's pupils as they executed an arrangement of class exercises with clarity and confidence. It is unmistakable that all students within the Academy are valued and encouraged in their pursuit of excellence. The focus of the evening was certainly on the accomplishments of the school's uppermost level, and rightly so. However, the Houston Ballet's Ben Stevenson Academy administrators can also be applauded for the quality program they deliver to the Houston community.

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