

Review: Ballet Memphis Shatters Basic Rules

By Alastair Macaulay

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The climate that Ballet Memphis brings to the stage is unorthodox, peculiar, fresh and large-spirited. That company is visiting the Joyce Theater with six pieces, four of which were on Tuesday's opening program. All four are odd; only one proves a complete work of art — Matthew Neenan's "The Darting Eyes" — and it's every bit as odd as the others. But the mood blowing through all of these dances is generous, imaginatively breaking rules.

Here's a basic rule for making a ballet: Don't mix scores from different sources. In particular, when using taped music, don't use recordings by a variety of composers and performers. Yet all four Memphis pieces cheerfully and effectively smash this rule. They all seem to show that no one composer is enough for what they have to say, and for the hybrid Memphian culture they're representing.

In "Darting Eyes," the music ranges from Baptist singing to a Handel chorus and part of a ballet score by John Adams. These are a religious background — subtext — for a portrait of a secular but Baptist community on the Mississippi River. It's baffling to see how Mr. Neenan switches between musical idioms and situations, and yet his stage world grows and deepens.

We can't follow half the stories that seem implicit here, but we hang on these people's vitality. One classy dame (Julie Marie Niekrasz) plays with her pearls until they torture her. The pathos of a climactic male-female duet, apparently about the withered hand of a man (Jared Brunson) and its cure by religious faith (the devotion of the woman, Virginia Pilgrim Ramey, seems to heal him) is riveting and imaginative.

The opening ballet, Steven McMahon's "Confluence," is remarkably successful in subverting another rule: Don't begin a ballet with dancing in silence. One woman (the authoritative Ms. Ramey), walking and dancing alone, establishes the mood of contemplative lyricism, which part of the Largo from Dvorak's "New World" Symphony then only heightens. Other characters come and go; the mood changes; and soon we're listening to Mahalia Jackson's "In the Upper Room," followed by Mavis Staples's recording of "Don't Knock."



Virginia Pilgrim Ramey, left, and Jared Brunson of Ballet Memphis in "The Darting Eyes." Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

There's a sense of memory, of place, of changing community here. Mr. McMahon doesn't have the control to make it all hang together: There's a switch of gears toward the end of the Dvorak where you can see some dancers looking stuck. Along the way, though, there are pleasingly subtle sequences. All the music is irresistible, but the choreography doesn't merely surrender to it; with different phrases happening at contrasting speeds, it often knits its way around it.

The titles of the program's other two pieces tell you that they have agendas: "I Am a Woman: Moulting," by Gabrielle Lamb, and "Politics," by Rafael Ferreras. But they also have senses of humor. "I Am a Woman" (to numbers from "Pan Tone," "Silfra," "Salon des Amateurs" and Cat Power's "The Covers Record") shows women grouped, assembled and shaped by

male costumers, but at no point is it predictable. To some degree these women — sometimes like dummies fitted into bodices and other garments — have lives and willpower. To some degree these men are more clonelike than the women they handle. It's a nutty piece, but the mind does not wander.

The cast of his “Politics” — Mr. Ferreras is one of the company's dancers — is all female. The politics here are those of the office; black pantsuits are worn by all. The fun is that four of these women wear point shoes and dance smart, gleaming ballet steps, while the other four wear sneakers and do hip-hop: Memphis jookin, in fact. The music overlaps Bach orchestral music with live singing of Moses Hogan's “Elijah Rock,” performed by vocalists from the Hattiloo Theater in Memphis.

The ballet girls rule; at first the jookin girls are so discreet you hardly realize their shoes are different — they too go on point, politely, briefly, as if out of deference. When they're left alone, they start to let rip with various break-dance moves. (Ptia Reed has a short solo whose effect is especially infectious: Big ripples pass through her.) And what builds up isn't antagonism but pluralism. This would be ponderous as sociology were it not for the dancing. Even the ballet women are differentiated. There's a nice impishness here.

“Confluence” and “I Am a Woman” open the program; neither has any pointwork. That's O.K.; several of the most famous works created for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes had no pointwork, either. When we do see women dancing on toe in “Darting Eyes” and “Politics,” it's presented with touches of satire, even skepticism.

The only dance here I'd like to see a second time in quick succession is “The Darting Eyes.” Apart from the mysteries of its multiple narratives, the phrasing has a three-dimensional richness, and the vocabulary a variety, that deepen the world onstage. **But all four pieces have an energy that's both lively and quizzical.**

Ballet Memphis continues through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, Manhattan; 212-242-0800, joyce.org.

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