

The Patriot Ledger

Dance: Boston Ballet makes successful leap with Forsythe's 'Artifact'

Monday

Posted at 4:55 PM

Updated at 5:00 PM

By Keith Powers/For The Patriot ledger

In a ballet, dancers dance. There's no talking. Most of the time there's a story: love, misfortune, magic, swans.

Not for William Forsythe's "Artifact."

Boston dance lovers should get used to the innovative choreographer: Boston Ballet is launching a five-year association with Forsythe, beginning with his full-length "Artifact," onstage through March 5 at the Boston Opera House.

It's not a new work, but new to America. Forsythe spent years working in Europe, mainly at Ballet Frankfurt, and "Artifact," first created in 1984, has only been seen in a shortened version in the United States, until now.

The work challenges, mystifies and appeals – all the while circumventing most everything you know about ballet. But also remaining entirely "ballet" at its core.

"Artifact" might best be described as choreographed theater. It has four main characters: Man with Megaphone (Nicholas Champion) and Woman in Historical Dress (Dana Caspersen, Forsythe's wife), both speaking, non-dancing roles; an enigmatic Woman in Gray (Reina Sawai, covered head to toe in ashen-colored makeup and costume); and the ensemble.

For dance audiences, the presentation takes some getting used to. The spoken parts are not occasional words: we are bombarded with talk, repetitive couplets of shadowy meaning: "You never say where/But you always say which"; "You forgot what I thought/I remember what you said"; and, repeatedly, "Step inside" or "Step outside."

Most of it gets delivered by the Woman in Historical Dress, some by Man with Megaphone – he really does have a megaphone. They wander onstage, mingling with the dancers, who perform hyper-gymnastic moves.

As an ensemble, the dancers move with hypnotic grace, often creating semaphore-like visual tableaux. Forsythe's movement vocabulary is strong, based on a concept of "épaulement": the derivation of most of the movement stemming from the shoulders, the angle of them, the relationship of the body – especially the arms – to them.

This is a dance of the arms. Forsythe's movement is never anything but original, athletic and graceful – and those qualities allow viewers to forgive some of the heavy-handed concepts that dominate "Artifact."

"Artifact" spills over into audience time, beginning before the lights go down, continuing during intermission (ominous industrial-sounding music), and having curtains fall precipitously during the midst of dance scenes.

The Woman in Gray dances silently, beautifully. Her moves often combine robotic gestures and dub steps, and part of the time she conducts the ensemble in semaphore. Deathly gray in appearance, she creates a striking presence.

"Artifact" has two movements and multiple scenes. Powerfully attractive among these scenes is a massive pas-de-deux involving two couples, danced authoritatively here by Dusty Button/Lasha Khozashvili and Ashley Ellis/Sabi Varga.

The score disappoints. Mostly amplified solo piano (Freda Locker), broken up with an archival violin recording of Nathan Milstein playing a virtuosic, double-stopped Bach chaconne, it purports to be partially improvised, but that seems a stretch. Mostly it's rhythmic minimalism, in service of the dance.

As repetitive as the dialogue gets, there is meaning and humor in the words. They are mainly delivered in a bland patter, with the striking exception of the opening of Act 2. In a tour-de-force of pace and intensity, Caspersen – seated across from Champion, arguing earnestly – fires off her double-talk in breakneck fashion. The dancers stand to each side of them, counting, clapping – but not dancing.

"Artifact" eludes interpretation. There is enough ballet in the work to make it obviously about ballet – its traditions, its movement vocabulary, the nature of its performances. And the overlapping vocabulary is also informed with ideas of memory, communication and forgetting.

But it strictly avoids story and also avoids creating prominent characters – even the starring couples in the pas-de-deux often melt into the ensemble, only to re-emerge. Costumes are nondescript. Often the dancers are dimly lit or back-lit, emphasizing that the individual is only part of a collective.

It is the movement of the collective that makes "Artifact" so striking. Boldly choreographed in multiple unison, mesmerizing sequences, many of the stage geometries are memorable.

Forsythe has injected a welcome charge into Boston's ballet world with "Artifact" and here's betting there is much more to come over the next five years.

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