

Dance: Boston Ballet shows its diversity with triple bill

Sunday

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By Keith Powers For The Patriot Ledger

The Boston Ballet taught an unexpected history lesson Friday evening at the **Opera House**. In one program, our dance class transitioned from ballet to modern, illuminated by works of Balanchine, Kylián and Ekman.

It was an evening of vigorous athleticism, lots of theater and humor, and surprisingly little ballet, highlighting the far-ranging versatility of the Mikko Nissinen's troupe. If you came for an evening of fouettes and jetés, you may have left disappointed. If you came for an entertaining evening of imaginative movement, you were in the right place.

Balanchine's 1960 choreography "Donizetti Variations" was sweetness and light, an agile reduction of a rarely heard opera ("Don Sebastian") from the bel canto genius. Ji Young Chae and Irlan Silva danced the the principal roles, with an active ensemble of nine filling out the narrative.

Loosely interpreting characters and scenes from the opera, "Donizetti Variations" takes the pastiche approach. Almost two dozen brief scenes show Balanchine in service of the composer, following astutely where the music leads.

Trios morphed into duets and solos, and back again, with hardly a pause. A brief comic interlude (where Nina Matiashvili steals the spotlight, and stubs her toe) added an airy moment to the pink-and-blue decor and mood. If dancing can be bel canto, this was it.

The title work of the program, Jiri Kylián's "Wings of Wax," boldly recreates the Icarus myth in symbolic, non-narrative ways. Its physical demands are great; its sense of theater enthralling; and its set design – with an upside-down tree hanging from the ceiling, a spotlight serving as its sun and revolving around it – turned the world on its head.

The performance seems to have grown in fluidity and ease since its breathtaking Boston Ballet premiere in 2013. Four couples dance as equals, to music of Biber, Glass and Bach. there is a brief transition to prepared piano music of John Cage.

Athletic to the extreme, Kylián's choreography demands body control. Every touch is unique: if you're watching the hands, you'd better notice the angle of the head, or the position of the feet. The choreography is like an orchestration for the body.

Lines are contiguous, movements are rapid and episodic, almost a sophisticated dub-step approach. None of the pairings could be singled out in this performance – eight dancers at the top of their skills, interpreting this rich choreography with confidence.

One episode, set to Glass's fifth string quartet, created a particularly striking stage: the four women in super slow-motion running poses, the men blazing in and around them with exhausting leaps, creating vibrant angles.

There is no doubt about Alexander Ekman's "Cacti": the ballet world is left far behind, and we're in the realm of modern dance theater. More than a dozen dancers occupy small square platforms that they perform on, hide behind, carry around and, at the climax, convert into a helter-skelter shelter.

A narrative voice intones a foppish appraisal of the work as it progresses, comically invoking the vanity of mixing cultures or art-forms. Stark lighting creates high-contrast shadows. The cast wears a kind of androgynous geisha outfit. You can tell it's going to be fun just looking at it.

At one point the narrator serves as a kind of audio supertitle, revealing a pair of dancers' thoughts as they work through the movement. "This is the hard part – we have to concentrate here" – they think (out loud) at one point. As off-beat theater it works wonderfully.

The comic highlight is, of course, cacti. Each of the dancers brings a potted plant onstage, dancing around them, knocking them over, finally holding them suggestively or threateningly.

History class was rarely this much fun.

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