

Tango, Malambo ... Bravo!

State Street Ballet sizzles in opener of weeklong festival

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Saturday night's sold-out State Street Ballet concert at the Lobero Theatre kicked off Gisele Ben-Dor's Tango and Malambo Festival -- setting a high standard for the performances that follow. Waves of "Bravo" and "Brava" flooded over the footlights to the beaming dancers and choreographers -- with good reason.

The company, in the middle of its 10th anniversary season, presented a dazzling program, replete with two premieres. The evening featured poetry and vocal accompaniment so sensuous that thoughts strayed to passionate imaginings; authentic country dance so rousing one had the urge to "dance along" in the aisles; and the highest caliber of choreography and dance.

Theatrics were at play, with performers entering from the audience, slide projections on a full proscenium scrim, smoke effects, sizzling mood lighting, poetry readings, dancing bolo whips and an exuberant guest performer, Roberto "Tata" Chagallo, joyfully performing authentic Malambo, the national dance of Argentina and the gauchos. It all worked.

By design, it was the music that captured our hearts; evidently, it fired up the dancers as well. When Ms. Ben-Dor conceived the idea of a South American musical celebration, her hope was to introduce this treasure chest of earthy, deeply moving compositions to the American mainstream. My hope is that the introduction will take hold and spread.

"Stravinsky's Tango" launched the proceedings, a steamy pas de deux choreographed by Artistic Director Rodney Gustafson to live accompaniment by concert pianist Sara Banta. It was clear from the outset we were in capable hands (and legs and feet) for the evening, as the dramatic duo demonstrated the flamboyance, obsession and exaggerated stylization unique to the genre. One could immediately appreciate the degree to which "line" -- aesthetically pleasing body alignment -- almost defines the proper execution of tango.

While one tragic love affair shy of the emotional depth a piece like this requires, resident choreographer William Soleau's "Nuevo Tango" cast a spell no one wanted to awaken

from. The ladies set the taut, temperamental tone with backs straighter than straight, and haughty, detached expressions that belied the animal desire coursing just beneath the surface of the edgy piece.

Nicole Grand came closest to delivering the kind of sultry tragedian composer Astor Piazzola surely had in mind when he wrote the passionate music. One talent that is surprisingly rare, even among great dancers, is an understanding of how to fully utilize the head to express emotion. Ms. Grand moves her head with great nuance to exquisite effect.

The all-male segment was, among other things, a clever study in stool partnering. The men projected an intensity that filled the hall with masculine power and athleticism. It is here that Soleau's inventiveness and charm created the most excitement.

The tango is a dance of sublimation and control, but its conventions only go so far. By infusing the traditional moves with virtuosity from other dance idioms, Soleau achieved many thrilling moments, particularly in several series of lifts that defied comprehension.

Soleau's world premiere of "Sonetos de Amor y Muerte" featuring music and lyrics by assorted folk composers, was a paean to romance. The three couples danced about loss, longing and blissful oblivion with an energy that seemed to shoot through the choreography, opening up space in a way that expressed the unconditional spirit of love. Jennifer Batbouta and David Fonnegra performed both their dancing and dramatic duties with consummate skill, eliciting awe-filled gasps on quite a few occasions.

The evening's featured presentation, the U.S. premiere of guest choreographer Jimmy Gamonet's "Estancia," drew cheers. Set to music by Argentinian composer Alberto Ginastera, this classically structured ballet tells a story of transformation in which Chagallo, a young, undisciplined city boy inspired by the love of a beautiful girl, strives and matures to achieve acceptance by her gaucho folk on the Argentine Pampas.

The centerpiece of the work is Chagallo's solo, danced by Mr. Fonnegra stripped to flesh-colored tights. It's an impressionistic "soliloquy" characterized by gestures of unfathomable yearning, melancholy, hope, euphoria, hopelessness and tranquility. If this had gone on for another hour, I could happily have watched. As the object of his heart's desire, Ms. Grand was perfectly cast. The conviction behind their performances made a simple tale very touching.

Costumes by Christina Gianni were striking and effective throughout, especially the clingy, deep blue velvet dresses in "Nuevo Tango" that moved sassily, revealing slashes of brazen red satin in an otherwise monochromatic setting. Although I missed the high heels so emblematic of the tango, there is nothing more impressive for extensions and lifts than the unbroken line of a long slender leg tipped by a pointe shoe. Lighting design by Lloyd Sobel was gorgeous.

Finally, with all due respect, in a town of such vast resources, can there be any excuse for clacking air conditioners and a sound system lagging well behind modern technology? A company of dancers putting forth this level of excellence deserves a venue that doesn't upstage their efforts.

DAVID BAZEMORE PHOTO

Nicole Grand and David Fonnegra perform during the U.S. premiere of choreographer Jimmy Gamonet's "Estancia," the featured presentation of Saturday night's State Street Ballet concert at the Lobero Theatre. The program kicked off the weeklong Tango and Malambo Festival.