

Dance Salad

MAGGIE FOYER
savours innovative
programming at
Houston's dance
festival



Dance Salad Festival is 20 years old but there is no sign of wilting. The ingredients for this wonderful fest are lovingly sourced and selected by director Nancy Hendrek in her annual quest to find the finest in taste and freshness that the dance world has to offer. This year's mix saw new companies from Italy and Brazil as well as old favourites from Germany, Britain and Canada.

From the ballet repertoire, it is easier to select snippets for gala fare; contemporary dance generally needs longer excerpts for the audience to experience the impact of the piece. As a result, the programmes were a balance of short, intense duets interspersed with longer conceptual pieces. An exception was Roland Petit's *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort*. Written in 1948, it was the oldest and longest of the ballet works but retains both its vitality and its validity. It was also a welcome opportunity to see Yonah Acosta and Jia Zhang revisit the roles they performed in London. Acosta has ingested the brooding persona of the Young Man, making every move, whether high-flying leaps or the stubbing out of his cigarette, rich with meaning. Hugging the chair, he suddenly became the sad and desperate man. Zhang chillingly inhabits the mask of Death: a frightening sexual predator under an icy veneer.



Yonah Acosta and Jia Zhang in Petit's *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort*. Photo: Amitava Sarkar

These were performances to cherish.

Henrique Rodovalho's choreography for Quasar Companhia de Dança was a revelation. In *Up in the Mouth* the dancers spent a lot of time flat on the floor, contemplating their toes and communicating in an inquisitive baby babble and wiggles of the toes. The sudden launching of a body into the air would result in a thump back to earth followed by a painful squeak – then on with the wriggling and prattling. Despite the oddness, it was so perfectly and utterly human in every behavioural detail and so lovely you didn't want it to end. *So Close* also bore the trademarks of this intense human understanding translated into very physical movement, the relationships real and tender and the comic moments beautifully pointed and very funny. *Mulheres*, a dance for three women and a red sofa, explored the female psyche again, with Rodovalho's surprisingly fresh take on body contact and dance technique.

Spellbound, from Italy, are a company of very young and vital dancers. Beautifully trained, with a clean finish in the legwork and

supple expressive arms, they were able to do justice to the highly original choreography of Mauro Astolfi. The double work was particularly interesting: the lifts sometimes gymnastic but never flashy and the choreography always choosing the unexpected path. *Lost for Words*, dressed very simply in nude tops and black skirts or trousers, was defined by the feisty relationships worked through the harsh, dissonant score. Astolfi handles the dynamics with a deft touch, holding the interest through a variety of ensembles, duos and an intensely beautiful solo from Maria Cossu. *NAFAS*, to a more classical mix of music, explored breath in a variety of guises, while *Downshifting* shared the same simplicity of setting, effective lighting and powerful performances. This is a choreographer we should see more of.

Pál Frenák's piece, *Seven*, was probably too long on such a busy programme, and the themes of cultural identity dragged. The idea was interesting: the enormous inflated inner tubes that served initially as weighty baggage and then opened a new physical dimension as the dancers bounced off the surface to interesting



Spellbound - Maria Cossu and Marioenrico D'Angelo in *Downshifting*. Foto: Paolo Laudicina

effect. There were good choreographic ideas, notably the trio of men towards the end, but some of the images, like the hooded men throwing a woman around like a rag doll, were disturbing and seemed to have little context. Gabrielle Lamb danced a solo from Pontus Lidberg's *Warriors*. A deep and expressive work, it was somewhat eclipsed and probably needed more white space around it to set it to best advantage.

The duets were many and varied. From the National Ballet of Canada, Sonia Rodriguez and Piotr Stanczyk performed Luis Martin Oya's *Por Ti*, a love song of a man and a woman meant for each other. They set the tone just right, and the magic rippled through dance that looked as free and natural as improvisation, rounding it off in a perfect close. Dresden Semperoper added the essential Forsythe. *Bach* from the *Neue Suite* is a gift for Elena Vostrotina and Oleg Klymyuk, who take on shapes of unnatural beauty. Between the long, pure lines are startling moments of twittering hands

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and arms that wrap, and even a touch of humour. The fade always seemed too soon on their exquisite last pose. The pair also performed the duet from *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated* in a performance that crackled with live fire as Klymyuk, like a lion tamer, shapes and supports Vostrotina's feline grace and electric rebound. The bursts of energy are fearsome, stripping away any fakery or pretensions. The work is twenty-five years old, but when you see it done with such panache, it feels like the paint isn't even dry. In Forsythe's *Slingerland* limbs fold and unfold and joints expand in his definitive switchback moves that dissolve into a slow stretch. The choreography has a classical resonance in the hint of an ironic bow or twirl of the wrist, a resonance effectively picked up by masters of the style Yumiko Takeshima and Raphaël Coumes-Marquet.

Alicia Amatriain and Jason Reilly from Stuttgart Ballet covered the extreme ends, performing Christian Spuck's *Le Grande Pas de Deux* and Itzak Galili's *Mona Lisa*. Classical ballet spoofs are an ever-popular genre, but none so wittily and lovingly embrace so many fleeting images of the great works as Spuck's mini-masterpiece. The duet demands dancers who have the technique to keep up with Rossini's runaway tempi and find each comic moment. Amatriain, sweetly docile to Reilly's swaggering danseur noble, nailed it all in a performance that had the audience enraptured. In *Mona Lisa*, Reilly gets first go, ripping into his tricks as Amatriain, the epitome of cool, observes before launching into her own kick-start action. The lighting is in your face, the music makes no concessions to being nice, while the dancers move with nonchalant grace between extreme physical exertions. It has a brilliant close, as Amatriain flips over to finish balanced in an arch on Reilly's feet. This was the DSF 2012 poster picture and an iconic image to bring the curtain down.