



DANCE Salad

MAGGIE FOYER rounds up a gem of a festival in Houston

Texan salads, like everything else in Texas, are big – heaped high and a real rabbit marathon. Similarly, Dance Salad Festival in Houston serves substantial portions over three marathon dance nights: a feast that won't leave you feeling undernourished.

Each year director Nancy Henderek scours the world to bring together a mix of extraordinary bodies and extraordinary personalities to work together on the same bill. The curation demands selection and tough choices, but such can result in a wonderful new creation, as was the case with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's Eastman Company. In the process of editing 20 or so minutes out of *Puz/zie*, *Petrus* has become a unique work of its own. *Petrus* – the Rock – takes the cruel Biblical punishment of stoning to metaphysical heights. Cherkaoui, with unerring instinct, has again assembled an international team of artists to interpret his ideas, augmenting the dance with the transcendental sounds of Kazunari Abe's Japanese flute and Fadia El-Hage's mellifluous voice singing Orthodox liturgy in Arabic.

The calm opening is shattered as, on the ear-splitting stroke of a taiko drum, Damien Fournier throws his stone with enough force to make the entire audience flinch. But he can't bring himself to release it, and like a demonic power it continues to drive his body in anguished leaps that send him crashing to the ground. Eventually he releases the stone on the grave mound and an arm emerges, followed by Sang-Hun Lee, his soft, liquid body covered in white powder. His physicality is phenomenal but it is his inner stillness that compels, encapsulating the wisdom of an old man and the innocence of a child. East and West come together and, in the gentlest of moments, Fournier wraps Lee's legs into a lotus position and takes his place kneeling before him as the work finishes.

There was also a showing of Christian Larson's film *Voltari*, choreographed by Cherkaoui on the music of Sigur Rós. Nicola Leahey and James O'Hara discover one another in a setting of harshest urban grunge in an otherworldly romance where fluid bodies

speak volumes. The camera pans the vertiginous height and rough concrete, pausing on the softness of a bare foot, always the infinite beauty.

This year's selection was sombre, both in context, design and choice of music, so the moments of humour and lightness were much welcome. Mats Ek's *Light Being* bursts with joy and Charlotte Broom and Christopher Akkril have made it their own. No one expresses the simplicity of the profound better than Ek as he paints the movements in clear expressionistic colours – and the cartwheel exit is just perfect.

High Heeled Blues from St Paul/Minnesota-based TU Dance won the sympathy of every woman persuaded to buy a totally unsuitable pair of heels and living to regret it. Choreographer Uri Sands, who also plays the salesman, blends clever comedy with jazz dynamics in his duet with Katelyn Skelley, a sucker for his smooth talk. It was a slight theme but one that hit all the right buttons and surprised with its freshness.

Eastman Company - Damien Fournier and Sang-Hun Lee in *Petrus*. Photo: Amitava Sarkar



Of the longer works, *Russia/Moscow*, choreographed by Marcos Morau, director of Barcelona's La Veronal, played to the ridiculous side of authoritarianism. Anna Hierro, in Russian militia garb, fires verbal machine gun rallies at Inma Asensio's adorable Kremlin duckling struggling to be a ballet swan. Asensio's duet with Lorena Nogal was a brilliant piece of physical comedy, as legs and arms wrap in a tangled ball until nobody's quite sure which bits belong to which dancer.

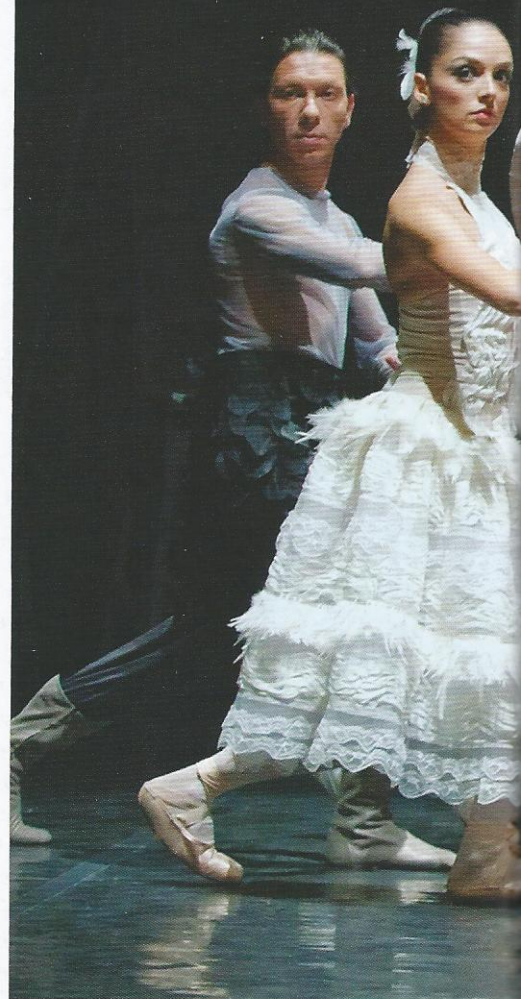
Spellbound, based in Rome, returned this year with two works by choreographer/director Mauro Astolfi. His choreographic language is rich and varied and his beautifully trained dancers, many from a gymnastic background, bring elegance to the athletic and a poised finish to edgy expression. *How to Pray*, performed by Maria Cossu and Giacomo Todeschi, was like a sonnet: short, poetic, with an internal rhythm and a twist in the tail as they finish clasped firmly together, with Cossu reaching out longingly. The duet is fluid, with lifts that curl and wrap, constantly inventing new shapes while each solo defined the individuality. The second work, *Dangerous Liaisons*, with nine dancers, is also about couples but these relationships are spiked with suspicion as trust is offered and betrayed. This adds bite to the encounters, with new beginnings and endpoints, while the range of movement Astolfi uses is constantly surprising. A sofa and an extremely versatile set of small tables complete the cast, adding an interesting mix of domesticity and acrobatic versatility.

The only solo work came from Fernando Hernando Magadan, a former NDT dancer who now has his own company. *Rouse* is about confronting the inner shadows, the creativity within oneself, and opens in minimal fashion. Magadan, his back to the audience, communicates initially through fluttering fingers and speaking hands before getting down to some serious dance delivered with a powerful punch.

Annabelle Lopez Ochoa crafted a neat quartet from her work *In Transit*. Agnés López Rio, in canary yellow shirt and sequined shorts, sits on a bench in a waiting room somewhere. She tangles in turn with three men who try to take over her space, but ultimately she reclaims her spot. The dancers from the Compañía Nacional de Danza in Spain did Ochoa proud, revelling in the energetic free flowing movement and athleticism of the partnering work.

The Polish National Ballet made their debut at the DSF this year and did so in grand style with 15 dancers and four works. *Moving Rooms* by director Krzysztof Pastor is a work choreographed for dancers and lights. The slimmed down version has lost none of its punch and still has a 'wow' finish. Danced with speed and accuracy, it highlighted both the physicality and the artistry of the company. *Persona*, a quirky and disturbing trio, was created by dancer Robert Bondara, a name to watch out for. Aleksandra Liashenko dominates until her partner develops an alter ego and the tables are turned; the two men, finally wrapped in one T-shirt, take turns in gently supporting her now passive frame. Bondara exploited the interesting opportunities the situation offered, showing a distinctive talent for shape and movement. The sections of the *Kurt Weill Suite*, accompanied by a local jazz band, brought light relief and balanced the intensity of *And the Rain Will Pass ...* which was curated most successfully. It was a joy to see Rubi Pronk back on stage after his injury. He is still not fully recovered (and was sadly unable to dance the solo Ochoa had written for him) but was able to dance an adapted version of the 'Spirit' role in this magnificent ballet for Poland. Liashenko and Pawel Koncewoj danced the quiet duet with the sensitivity it deserved, dying in the flames. This selection of works made an excellent introduction into the USA for the Polish Ballet and provided ballast for another exhilarating Dance Salad Festival.

Dans Fest Skopje



AMANDA JENNINGS visits Macedonia for a festival graced by a Russian legend

In the history of dance, and indeed in the history of the theatre, every generation seems to have produced a handful of extraordinary entrepreneurial pioneers who not only have innovative ideas but have the determination and skills to bring those ideas and ambitions to fruition. In Macedonia at the moment there is one such woman, who is not only artistic director of Skopje Dance Academy and Skopje Dance Theatre, is a Professor of the University of ESRA Paris-Skopje-New York in Skopje and holds the position of chief choreographer at State Opera and Ballet Theatre Antalya in Turkey, but has also set up the Annual Dans Fest Skopje, bringing companies from overseas to showcase their work. She is Risima Risimkin, and I was able to see the fruits of her various labours when I visited Skopje for the opening of this year's Dance Festival.

The evening began with a short performance by the Skopje Dance School, giving an excellent opportunity for students of all ages to show their skills and enjoy the opportunity to perform on stage. Extremely well drilled, they did their teachers proud. Following this, Risimkin introduced the guest of honour, Vladimir Vasiliev, who was presented with an award for excellence. We were shown a beautifully compiled short film of clips from Vasiliev's greatest performances, and it was a joy to see them again and be reminded what a truly great dancer he was, his outstanding technique enhanced by extraordinary passion and