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Steps ahead

Festival Ballet mixes it up

BY JOHNETTE RODRIGUEZ

⌚ Festival Ballet Providence's Up CLOSE on HOPE series has often featured intimate duets, trios, or quartets. But the current program of five pieces, two of them world premieres, is expansive in the number of dancers used (up to 12) and scope.

The premiere of *Wedding Day in Trolldhaugen* opens the show, set to a solo piano piece by Edward Grieg and choreographed by Piotr Ostaltsov. It is, indeed, a wedding scene, with bride (Emily Bromberg) and groom (Gleb Lyamenkoff) surrounded by parents and friends. Spirits are high when the tempo is fast, with folk dance-flavored steps (heel to floor, toe up), gestures (hands on hips), and patterns (dancers circling round each other).

Bride and groom seem happy and immersed in each other until "the other man" (Ty Parmenter) and "the other woman" (Carolyn Dellinger) step from the shadows. The music slows to Grieg's romantic strains,

and the new couples lean into each other, run a hand along a cheek. Their movements are as tender and evocative as the uptempo parts are frisky and playful. Ostaltsov has created a mini-drama of longing turned to duty, as the parents gently push them back to the wedding rituals. It's a terrific twist on Grieg's music and Old Country customs.

The next two pieces are Mihailo "Misha" Djuric's first collaboration with composer Barbara Kolb in the '96 duet *Extremes* and Marius Petipa's choreography for Tchaikovsky's *Bluebird*. These couldn't be more different, but both are terrific. The *Bluebird* pas de deux will be performed in an international ballet competition this spring, so this was a sneak preview by Bromberg and Andrew Skeels, a showcase of leaps and entrechats (when the feet beat against each other midair) by Skeels and precision jetés and arabesques by

Bromberg. They acquit themselves admirably and with their own personal flair.

The tasks set for dancers Letitia Guerrero and Alexander Akoulov are even more demanding. To the abstract tones and stop-start rhythms of Kolb's music, Djuric has rendered poses and partnered moves that are angular and full of attitude, both emotional and balletic ("attitude" in ballet terms means one leg raised with the knee slightly bent). Other sharp angles — hands held palm up, as if to say "stop"; hands turned flat above the head during a twirl; or one foot held parallel to the floor while rotating on the toe of the other — make startling dance images and convey the cold determination of the characters not to care about each other. But the flirtation continues, and the dancers' turns and lifts are breathtaking, making the piece truly a tour de force.

Dancer/choreographer Mark Harootian's new work *Mutable Air*, to a segment of George Winston's solo piano *Autumn*, also makes you catch your breath over and over at the beautiful floating and falling movements of eight dancers who partner in varying combinations (one of the four couples is two women). Harootian has listened to the arpeggios, runs, and trills of this music for years, so totally captivating in its ability to set up visual images. Translating

that to dancers in frothy white skirts leaping on and off stage, moving past and with each other, seems so natural that you feel the flow of air, the rustle of leaves, the mutability of human relationships. This piece is mesmerizing and stunning.

The last new dance, *The Hardest, Part I*, is the most unusual. It's a joint project of AS220's Broad Street Rhode Show, a young troupe of eight who do hip-hop and spoken word, with Festival Ballet and its classically trained dancers. Massachusetts-based Lorraine Chapman, who has made dances for companies across North America, is the choreographer. Interaction between the two groups proceeds in several ways. Poets and vocalists Amber Newmann, Stephiane Robbins, Anjel Newmann, and Michelle Mancone give us gritty stories and beat-hungry lyrics that drive the dancers behind them. Spoken word performers Alex Baptista, David "Day-Day" Arkins, and Jeremy "Suave" Richardson touch on the difficulties of being an artist: "Artists put their heart in it, makin' somethin' outta nothin'."

Other memorable lines: "Who's the real artist? I choose the one who works the hardest"; "My art is worth its weight in imagination"; and the final pronouncement: "They do it to respect their soul, lungs, and heart." Indeed. ©