

Miami City Ballet unleashes classical might, energy, and plenty of verve

No vice here

By Stephanie Hunt



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I do love a good romp. And I love classical ballet too — all that pointed-toe precision, pliés and pirouettes. Fortunately Miami

City Ballet delivered both at the Gaillard Center Saturday night in a beautifully balanced program of works. From the opening with Balanchine's *Walpurgisnacht Ballet* to the closing work by choreography's young darling Justin Peck, MCB's corps was absolutely in sync and energetic, and seemed to be having a total blast showing off their company's impressive artistic range.

The Balanchine opener set a bold, defiant tone for the whole performance. The curtain opens with 24 ballerinas lined up in classic formation, dazzling in their jewel-toned costumes, and all but the principal dancer (sporting a standard-issue tight bun) wore their hair ribboned in low-slung ponytails. As the piece evolves, that hair steals the show. In the final, full-throttle movement, set to *Faust* by Charles Gounod, the dancers swoop, leap and lope across stage, stampede-like, their hair now loose and unbridled and dancing too, as if in a Vidal Sassoon ballet. I've watched a lot of ballet (and pulled my dancing daughters' hair into many a bun) and don't think I've ever seen anything as alive and thrilling as that.

Next up was a less formal, more playful pas de deux from *Carousel*. Dancers Jennifer Lauren and the powerful Chase Swatosh held their own, infusing refined technique and plenty of personality into the updated piece derived from the Rodgers and Hammerstein's

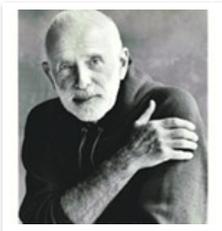
original, but it would be hard for anyone to follow that first number.

Following an intermission, MCB came back with what I found to be the highlight of the program — Concerto DSCH, set to a Shostakovich piano concerto played live by the intrepid Francisco Rennó. The choreography by Alexei Ratmansky was shimmering brilliance — seamless, lyrical, and captivating throughout. The two soloists in pastel green costumes danced with otherworldly romance against a backdrop of lithe precision and emotion from the rest of the corps de ballet. Utter gorgeousness.

And as the curtain rose in the final piece, the audience gasped at the breathtaking backdrop by our local-boy-gone-big-time Shepard Fairey. But that initial awe aside, the heat index in Justin Peck's Heatscape never quite rose high enough for me. The complex music by Bohuslav Martinu was intriguing and fresh, and the dancers surely did their part, displaying the muscle, discipline and dare-devilness that by now we expected from them, but the backdrop, as beautiful as it was, seemed more to overpower and distract than to add to the work.

Perhaps that's what ballet, and certainly the swirling talent of the Miami City Ballet, is good at teaching us, though — how hard it is to hone our attention, how challenging to dissect how one element interplays with others when so much artistry and beauty surrounds us, both on stage and in our broader world.

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