

## Dance

## A Leap to Lift Spirits

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As the world economy teeters at the abyss and American mattresses start to fill with cash, there's a bracing feeling of optimism at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater. Some people never give up hope, and Suzanne Farrell -- once one of the nation's most important ballerinas, now a ballet director of Donald Trumpian will -- seems to be one of them.

Her company's series, which runs through the weekend, began Wednesday with three lesser-known works by George Balanchine, stunning choices that refuse to condescend to the audience and that reveal Farrell herself to be a high-rolling gambler of startling proportions.

With "Liebeslieder Walzer," accompanied by 33 Brahms love songs; "Episodes," shot through with Anton Webern's astringent musical squirts, and "Ragtime," a forgotten pas de deux with Stravinsky at the wheel, Farrell has flagrantly ignored the ultraconservative pattern of ballet programming in Washington. "Ragtime" is a pretty little plaything; "Liebeslieder," never danced here before, and "Episodes," not seen here since 1984, are

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works of towering imagination and musical feeling. But who would ever think of putting the three of them on a program together?

With all the time-tested, audience-friendly Balanchine repertoire out there, there is little reason for most company directors to dig into the archives and, among boards and presenters, little stomach for risk. Yet Farrell -- who is guided, so I am told, by her taste alone -- has found a way to give us something new from a man long dead, and to offer us fresh perspectives on his genius.

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As handsome and responsive as her dancers are, however, there are few glories among them. The Kennedy Center finances Farrell's enterprise on the cheap, and she makes do, borrowing dancers from assorted regional troupes and whipping them into shape in a few weeks. (There's a Depression-era virtue for you.) If Farrell had the dancer excellence to match her vision, we wouldn't be talking about five days in the Eisenhower; there would be a grander unveiling in the Opera House and an international tour, perhaps, with fans sipping bubbly from the ballerinas' slippers. But this program, which repeats tomorrow night and Sunday afternoon, is nonetheless too distinctive, too juicy, too fabulously fearless, to pass up.

"Liebeslieder" was the most satisfying work of the evening, though it fell somewhat short of the poetic heights a truly stellar performance can reach. This piece about love shows Balanchine to be as brilliantly capable with the watercolors of romantic ballet as he was with those black-inked modern works such as "Agon" and "The Four Temperaments."

"Liebeslieder," from 1960, is reminiscent of Antony Tudor's 1936 masterpiece about love, social convention and heartache, "Lilac Garden." Though very different, both works hinge on layers of feeling and shifting moods among well-bred couples at a party. "Liebeslieder," ingeniously constructed of short, simple dances, performed by four couples over an hour's time, is a compelling view of the tenderest dimensions of the heart.

The first of the ballet's two sections shows young lovers in formal 19th-century dress dancing in an airy drawing room. (Farrell used a minimalist version of the set, with arching French doors and a chandelier; the costumes are based on the original Karinska designs.) After a bit of a ragged start, the dancers had no trouble conveying bright infatuation, and were especially convincing in the merriest of the Brahms lieder.

There are shadows amid the pleasure; Michael Cook shields his eyes when dancing with Bonnie Pickard. Momchil Mladenov gives Erin Mahoney-Du gentle pushes between steps,

controlling her every move. Runqiao Du seems taken aback by Ashley Hubbard's gaiety, and at one point Natalia Magnicaballi averts her face when dancing with Matthew Prescott.

In the second section, the women have changed from heeled slippers and heavy silks into pointe shoes and tulle, and the dancing is opened-up and free. (Balanchine said of the split: "In the first act, it's the real people that are dancing. In the second act, it's their souls.") But where the dancing ought to grow warmer, this cast was less confident; this should improve over the series.

Mahoney-Du, a Washington Ballet veteran, was the most complete dancer, capable of delicacy and rapture. A vocal ensemble from the Master Chorale of Washington sang the lieder with energy and brightness; Ron J. Matson and Glenn Sales played the piano duet with a light, sensitive touch.

If "Liebeslieder" is a masterpiece, "Ragtime" is but a doodle on a napkin. Over the years Balanchine made a couple of choreographic stabs at Stravinsky's 1918 "Ragtime for Eleven Instruments." The version he made for Farrell and Arthur Mitchell, in 1966, died out after a few seasons. Farrell reconstructed it from a poor-quality film shot by her sister all those years ago, but as with other works she has revived as part of her Balanchine Preservation Initiative, some portion of this is her own invention.

Elisabeth Holowchuk, in a stylized flapper dance, and a dapper Cook were a sparkling pair, though there is more cuteness here than choreography. What's most interesting is the music, played onstage by members of the Opera House Orchestra. It's a tickle of a ragtime; it doesn't gallop away but pokes around, with a violin or a trumpet swirling around here and there. And then it gets smaller and smaller. I have to say it's the most fun I've ever had with Stravinsky.

"Episodes" returns us to the stark, angular leotard-ballet that most audiences associate with Balanchine. It started out as one of the craziest collaborations in dance history: In 1959, Balanchine invited Martha Graham to create one half of the piece, while he made the other. Graham's half quickly vanished from the repertoire. Balanchine's contribution is quirky, witty and puzzling; it's a ballet of little sound and few steps. Webern's jagged music is reduced in spots to elemental notes, while the dancing is similarly spare.

The dancers looked vastly more comfortable in this work than in "Liebeslieder." Dancers from Ballet Austin, with whom Farrell has forged an artistic partnership, filled out the cast.

There's a wonderful tribute to (or an inside joke about) Graham in the "Five Pieces" section, danced with sophisticated verve by Indre Vengris Rockefeller and Mladenov. At one point Mladenov picks up Rockefeller so her legs shine bone-white above his head like great antlers -- and very like the 1950s-style headdress of a Graham dancer. Out of a brave and intriguing program, that image continues to make me smile.

A second program, "The Balanchine Couple," will be performed tonight, tomorrow afternoon and Sunday night.

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