

Vendredi, 31 juillet 2009-07-31

Les Grands Ballets is beautiful

By **TRESCA WEINSTEIN**, Special to the Times Union

BECKET, Mass. -- Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal eschews its native language this week with an all-Italian program at Jacob's Pillow that is as sunny and sensual as a Tuscan summer.

Two 40-minute works by Mauro Bigonzetti (a native of Rome) show two equally crowd-pleasing sides of this fabulous contemporary ballet company. The first, "Four Seasons," is set to Antonio Vivaldi's beloved work of the same name, while "Cantata" is choreographed to original and traditional music from southern Italy, performed live by the four female vocalists of Gruppo Musicale Assurd. What's not to love?

In its fervent musicality and endearing personality, Wednesday's program was the diametric opposite of last week's performance at the Pillow by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (which turned out to be the troupe's last run during Cunningham's lifetime). Les Grands Ballets' dancers are warmth incarnate, constantly in relationship and bursting with humanity, as well as being consummate technicians.

In both works, Bigonzetti does brilliant, original things with classical structure and vocabulary, adding unexpected elements such as body percussion and threading humorous gestures and arrangements throughout the forceful trajectory of the movement. "Four Seasons" opens and ends with 13 minimally costumed couples onstage, embracing and releasing each other, the audible slap of body against body perfectly timed to the music. The transitions between the 12 sections are sly and inventive: A group of men deliver one woman into the spotlight and carry the soloist that came before into the wings; entering for his solo, Jeremy Raia lets out a long breath and "blows" Marie-Eve Lapointe and Robert Deskins offstage.

There's a bit of Mark Morris about "Four Seasons," in the way the dance becomes a physical expression of the music and particularly in its pas de deux, which sometimes have the feel of a Shakespearean romp in the woods. Bigonzetti often turns his female dancers upside down in the men's arms, so their legs frame his face; at other times, the women go stiff and limp at once, like dolls, as the men carry them across the stage. Solos take shape like yoga postures, slowly and with total focus.

While "Four Seasons" is as lush and ravishing as its score, "Cantata" has all the fire and grit of the folk songs to which it's set -- music that swells with history and emotion. The four singers, who also play accordion and percussion, join the dancers on the stage throughout the piece, which has the feel of a village celebration. The women, with loose hair and swiny dresses, and the men, in vests and suspenders, form lines and circles, roll across the floor, and pair off to court and do battle. In the last moment of Wednesday's performance, they turned as one to the audience and blew us a kiss, a gesture that was returned with a standing ovation.

Tresca Weinstein, a freelance writer from Canaan is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

Dance review

Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Jacob's Pillow, Becket, Mass.

Length: Two hours, one intermission

Repeats: 8 tonight through Saturday; 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; \$58

Info: (413) 243-0745 or <http://www.jacobspillow.org>