



DANCE REVIEW

Canadiens all humility, heart



By [Janine Parker](#)

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BECKET - Last week, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's appearance at Jacob's Pillow turned out to be the final time the group would perform while Cunningham was alive; the great modern dance innovator passed away on Sunday night at the age of 90. Naturally, it was with a heavier step that audiences returned for this week's offering, but the program presented by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal was thrillingly cathartic, a dose of balm to ease our loss.

The two works on the program are both by the Italian choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti, but they are highly different in style. "The Four Seasons" is preternaturally angular and airy, a balletic-based study of dancers as creatures with music by the Venetian-born Antonio Vivaldi. "Cantata" is earthy and human, utilizing a hearty, sweaty, barefoot modern-dance vocabulary with live accompaniment by Gruppo Musicale Assurd, an all-female quartet who perform contemporary compositions and traditional music of southern Italy.

The Canadiens, under the direction of Gradimir Pankov, are stunning technicians, versatile enough to perform this contemporary program as well as traditional ballet repertoire. But they don't trumpet their abilities; rather, they throw themselves into the work with a compelling mix of humility and guts. In "The Four Seasons," they seamlessly morph from a contorted tussle with the floor, say, into a familiar ballet step thrown off with a winning insouciance.

If Bigonzetti had any reservations about tackling Vivaldi's well-loved and (and sometimes overused) score, the very rightness of his interpretation helps the viewer hear it with fresh ears. Underscoring the great ebullience of Vivaldi's strings, the piece resounds with the dancers' claps, slaps, finger-snaps, and stomps.

The moment the curtain parts - revealing the dancers scattered about the stage, dreamily undulating as if underwater - we are pulled into a lushly buzzing world of insects and other creatures of the earth. The dancers frequently flick their feet; they could be shaking off dew. The women are lifted and almost thrown sideways, their legs moving from bent, tucked-up positions into kicked extensions; they look like crazy tadpoles. Pointe shoes in such a dance could be a clunky liability, but Bigonzetti uses them as natural extensions of the women's legs.

The solos and duets are intimate and charged with sex and power, yearning and playfulness. But the 12 movements reveal Bigonzetti's deftness with all configurations: His sections of just men, or just women, are intensely rhythmic with driving, dynamic phrases.

The choreographer's facility with groups comes most brilliantly to the fore in the raucous yet moving "Cantata." The informal setting has the fabulous four musicians of Gruppo Musicale Assurd moving among the dancers, who sometimes just sit on the fringes. The dancers also sing and even argue with one another in Italian. It could be a party or a wedding that goes into the wee hours, and sometimes there's a hint of violence. The women are often carried around like rag dolls or stumble across the stage like zombies.

Bigonzetti's observations of social interactions are uncanny, but so are his ultimately optimistic feelings about our humanity. "Cantata" has a huge heart that finally spills over lovingly. Toward the end, the dancers bumped up into one another, a hand over another's mouth, one long slumped, spent line. Then they looked out and blew us a big kiss. How we laughed and clapped.■