

Ballet review: Four Seasons & Cantata

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Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal performs Cantata.

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EDMONTON - It's not every day that one witnesses the exuberant, abandoned frenzy of a barn dance where something strange is obviously in the water. Intoxicating as such an event may be to watch, it's a setting where emotions fly just as violently as the flinging legs and arms of the corps in Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal.

To say that the energy and zeal of Les Grands in their performance on Tuesday night matched their name — grand, that is — would be an understatement.

This 28-strong group of dancers began the evening with an exploration of romantic relationships in all their gutsy, heartbreaking and charming incarnations.

Italian choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti created his version of Vivaldi's Four Seasons for Les Grands in 2007, and since then the piece, paired with its raucous second-half Cantata, has become a signature evening in Les Grands' well-worn repertoire.

The stage in Four Seasons is first filled with shadows of listless, floating arms of the full company, the lights eventually revealing the dancers dressed in filmy, nude-coloured costumes. Acrobatic movements and barrel rolls ripple across the stage as the dancers pair off, and the grounding thuds of hands beating on chests is introduced as a token gesture.

Bigonzetti's dance brings out an unexpected, earthy quality in this familiar score — these concertos are so well-known that it's difficult not to associate their grandiose strings with typically stiff, classical training. Though much of the movement here was rooted in traditional ballet techniques, the dancers' bodies performed beyond conventions: It's rare to see a ballerina squat and tip forward on pointe shoes, and it's rarer still to see one bounce on the stomach of a dancer lying on the ground. The powerful thrust of one soloist who defiantly planted the sole of her foot on the chest of a man standing before her was palpable throughout the Jubilee's house.

Four Seasons was a display of great agility and emotive characterizations, but made room for romance and whimsy, too. Moments of humour peeked through in the performance as one dancer struck a pose at centre stage, only to shrug and slouch offstage when no music responded. A duet between partners who playfully irked each other to the point of a full-on fight, then grinningly made amends was a wonderful post-Valentine's Day jab.

Still, other moments were filled with intense frustration and regret, as in the beautifully danced duet between a hardened woman and her desperate partner, which reeked of the sorrow and longing for an old love grown sour.

With a piece so rooted in deep emotions, the solo pieces fell somewhat flat when set against the strong duets and visually incredible group numbers. With the exception of Vanesa G.R. Montoya's undeniable solo presence in both pieces, a number of the stand-alone characters didn't quite stand on their own with conviction to match the camaraderie and partner-dynamics in the rest of the program.

Cantata finished the evening with an old-world, folkloric zing, transporting characters from a small European village to the stage for a good ol' fashioned throw down. Italy's Gruppo Musicale Assurd led the cast in a choral lullaby, thereafter opening into a whirling dirge of flat-footed, swarthy taunts by the women, which countered the men's frantic, grasping efforts.

As different pairs and groups emerged and shrunk back, the ensemble gathered in the shadows to watch and hoot enthusiastically whenever some feat of strength or sensuality was demonstrated.

Suggestive and colourful as some of the concepts were, the gaping leg stances and girls nuzzling each other's bellies were movements more coy and charming than overt, and lent to a warming sense of joy in their communion.

One of Bigonzetti's masterpieces, Cantata is part rapture, part serenade. The greater movements are primal, raw and relentlessly paced, but it ends with a gentle, sleepy sense of contentment. The dancers finally blow a collective kiss to the audience, and the lights flicker out over a crowd all too happy to receive their own taste of the playful debauchery that just transpired.

The evening was a celebration not only of wild, carnal expression, but also of the anticipated return of one of Canada's greatest dance treasures in Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.
