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Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal

Houston Ballet's Cullen Contemporary Series, created about a decade ago to showcase local choreographic talent, has returned in a new guise -- offering the Wortham Center's small stage to a visiting company. If Friday's show by [Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal](#) is any indication, the series could become a hot ticket. Catch the second and final performance Saturday if you can.

This LGB program, which has toured widely, juxtaposes two unique yet sympatico barefoot ballets: *Toot*, by the Dutch choreographer Didy Veldman, and a radical take on the Diaghilev classic *Les Noces* by Belgian-born Stijn Celis.

Part of what made Friday's program so fascinating -- aside from the talents of the fab, athletic dancers -- is how these two choreographers have made such completely different dances using such similar movement elements. *Toot* is quirky but gentle (even when there's a gunfight), and *Les Noces* is fierce and fast. Yet both employ moments of stylized slow motion, exaggerated expressions on faces painted white, hunched walks, splayed legs and other devices that are a sort of shorthand in contemporary dance for conveying human pathos. The partnering has its similarities too; often, the women freeze when they're lifted, doll-like.

Toot, set to circus music by the Balanescu Quartet and a bit of Dmitri Shostakovich's *Suite No. 2* for Jazz Orchestra, is charming, charming, charming. Although thematically, it sprawls a bit. It's partly about confrontation, partly about individuality vs. conformity, partly about -- and here's where it's really broad -- the human condition.

The dancers are clowns (love those pointy buns and mohawk hairdos) whose get-ups made me think "Punk Pierrot." The ingenious circus ring set breaks into curved sectionals that get stacked to make walls, upended (so they might be buildings swaying in the wind) and turned upside down, where they rock like seesaws.

Among the highlights: a buoyant duet in which a girl's head and shoulders are consumed by red balloons attached to her costume (the effect is so magical, you wouldn't be at all shocked to see her float off) and a mock dance rehearsal in which the captain has trouble getting a few dancers to obey his commands -- until someone begins singing "Volare," and they can't resist the urge to join a quirky line dance.

I was ga-ga for the lighting in *Les Noces*, which at times looked inspired by Rembrandt. Celis' dance finds the terror and tension in the Igor Stravinsky score better than other versions of this famous ballet envisioning a ritualistic peasant wedding -- including Jiri Kylian's *Svadebka*, which Houston Ballet performed last year. The score is written for a chorus, and the soprano's high notes read here as screams: This is a dance about forced sex; love is NOT part of the equation.

Celis sets up a whole stageful of brides and grooms, emphasizing foot-poundingly strong, unisonal dances as the men and women confront each other. The women are more aggressive early on -- almost menacing, like zombie brides (and totally cool in their wispy-fluffy-mess o' tulle costumes, each different). But ultimately, they're picked up in those frozen poses and carted off, in slow motion, like mannequins.

To compare a traditional *Les Noces* to Celis', click [here](#) for a glimpse of the Royal Ballet's version, which is about as close as you'll get to the original by Branislava Nijinska. Then look for an even shorter snippet of an LGB performance [here](#) in the middle of a video about their trip to Paris last July.