

Early Lubovitch...New Lubovitch

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NEW YORK -- Some ballets develop via a dare. In the case of his “The Legend of Ten,” choreographed to sections of Brahms’s Quintet in F Minor (Op. 34), Lar Lubovitch recently told dance writer Maura Donohue that George Balanchine provoked him to take on the late 19th-century composer. “It’s impossible to choreograph to [Brahms],” Balanchine told him. “Those kinds of statements,” Lubovitch maintained, “give me an itch that I have to respond to.” [Consequently, in 1985, Lubovitch responded by creating his glorious “A Brahms Symphony”. Now, 25 years later, he has once again returned to Brahms.]

As it turned out, “Legend,” viewed at its premiere Nov. 21 at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, was the least provocative of the 67-year-old choreographer’s program of four dances. Whereas “North Star” (1978), and the excerpted duet from his “Meadow” (1999), and “Coltrane’s Favorite Things” (2010) succeed through their beauty of phrasing and their succinctly crafted approach to one idea, “Legend” founders because of too many ideas...

Most of Lubovitch’s abstract ballets have been praiseworthy because they are broadly sketched and firmly controlled, romantic yet cool, florid but not riddled with gesture. The duet from “Meadow” is great example. It isn’t in the tradition of the eroticism-fueled duet, predicated on the female dancer’s beauty and the male’s strength. It’s a sculptural action painting: Two moving forms continuously finding balance, mostly while Katarzyna Skarpetowska is held aloft at daunting angles by Brian McGinnis, who, like a starfish digging into the sand, stretches his limbs to anchor her.

In the beginning of the ballet, choreographed to Gavin Bryars’ “Incipit Vita Nova,” the dancers create a shape that resembles a compass. McGinnis holds Skarpetowska upside down, their bodies forming a single vertical line; she is the compass’ pointer finding north in relation to the earth’s magnetic field. This beginning image reaches its apotheosis in the final moments, when Skarpetowska is gently pivoted on the ball of her foot as McGinnis walks her circumference, reinforcing the idea of mapping the sun’s diurnal path.

“Legend” also begins with two dancers. Two men run to the center of the stage. They halt, glare at each other, and, like defective firecrackers fizzling out, retreat to their respective starting points - inside two cabal-like groups at opposite sides of the stage. L. Isaacs’ unisex black costumes-corseted, velvet shirts, blousy, mesh-fabric sleeves, and black calf-length booties-make the company members look like Ninja jousters. Consequently, “Legend” appears to be about combat. Yet Lubovitch’s style is characteristically steeped in legato, his dancers’ loose, looping limbs are the quintessence of lyrical. Combat does not fit well in his vocabulary.

In their opposing groups, the dancers creep toward a lone individual or couple with cross-wise steps and scissoring arms. Jenna Fakhoury appears midway through the ballet and is lifted like a devout object by Reid Bartelme, giving “Legend” a narrative touch...

The number ten holds a special place for Lubovitch. For [13 years], beginning in 1995, the choreographer [withdrew from touring so that Lubovitch could work even more intensively with his company in New York, creating new work rather than rehearsing old repertory for tour] (earning a Tony Award for his choreography in “Into the Woods,” and new audiences for his full-length ice dancing production of “The Sleeping Beauty”).

Today, Lubovitch’s...42-year-old...company is composed of ten dancers, the standout among them being Bartelme. As the tallest male, he performed the central role in “North Star,” which was made for, yes, ten dancers. Throughout the work, to Philip Glass’s piece of the same name, Bartelme remained attached to his fellow dancers through his long arms, they latching on to them and fanning out to form a giant birdlike figure. Watching them move in unison up-and-down, back-and-forth, was like watching seaweed move in response to churning waves. Bartelme’s long, lanky frame gracefully yielded to the ever-shifting, kaleidoscopic reconfigurations. Occasionally he looked like Christ on the Cross, utterly exhausted by the push and pull of the forces around him.

The other male dancer of note was Jonathan E. Alsberry. In “Coltrane’s Favorite Things,” to a live recording of the saxophonist and his small band playing in 1963 [in Copenhagen], Alsberry underscored the tight, rhythmic tension of Coltrane’s playing. Whereas the other dancers resembled lovely spaghetti strings, Alsberry’s jagged lines electrified.