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Lar Lubovitch: Giving Pleasure Through Beauty

Posted by [Andrew Boynton](#)



In Lar Lubovitch's choreography, the swirl of dancers moving in unison to a sweeping piece of music is a thrilling sight. Underneath his lush phrases, individuals are always visible, their personalities emerging in the clarity of their dancing; we see alliances form and crumble. In Lubovitch's recent season at Florence Gould Hall, he once again proved how accomplished he is at ravishing the eye, but he also exposed another side, telling stories both complicated and mysterious.

The Romantic composers have long been a good fit for Lubovitch. After becoming known for using music by minimalists such as Steve Reich ("Marimba," "Cavalcade") and Philip Glass ("North Star"), in 1985 he turned to Brahms, using his Third Symphony for "A Brahms Symphony," which married Lubovitch's carefully crafted formalism with an unabashed luxuriance. "The Legend of Ten" (2010), the first of the works presented at Florence Gould, was also set to Brahms (the first and fourth movements of the Quintet for Piano and Strings in F Minor, Op. 34); it provided an introduction for anyone unfamiliar with Lubovitch's work and a welcome reminder for everyone else. At the outset, nine of the company's ten dancers (immediately recognizable as a cohesive unit, dressed identically in L. Isaac's black tights, gauzy black tops, and black boots) launched headlong into rippling, pulsating phrases that were in perfect accord with the music, surging through the space, which was sensitively lit by Jack Mehler. Occasionally, a lone dancer stepped out from the group briefly, as if to breathe a little freer, and then returned to the community. Roundness pervaded: in the circling patterns, in the ring shapes formed by arms lifted up and over the head. It's the kind of movement that can make an audience sway in involuntary sympathy.

Then a woman, Elisa Clark, entered. Though she was dressed just as the other dancers were, she seemed a stranger in their midst, or an outcast, and upset the balance of the group. A repeated pushing gesture by the others, though smoothly stated, suggested a rejection, but Clark remained, and became aligned with one of the men, Clifton Brown. Clark is slender, lithe, crisp; Brown is a big man, juicy yet precise in his movement. The size difference made all kinds of lifts possible, and

Lubovitch obliged, as Brown described abstract patterns in the air using Clark's body. As their relationship deepened, the group gradually accepted Clark, and she joined them in folkish phrases, the dancers' arms shaking in the air, their steps joyful. The central pair repeatedly broke away, cementing their independence, but the group always welcomed them back; at the end, all ten dancers cascaded down the diagonal, stopping in an array of shapes and lifts, interrupted in a common pursuit.

"Crisis Variations," from 2011, went in another direction entirely. Lubovitch made movements based on associations provoked by the word "crisis," and the resulting choreography was not round and enveloping but angular and fragmented. He even created an actual crisis for the work's dancers, by replacing at the last minute the music that he had used in making the piece, Liszt's "Transcendental Études" for piano, with a new score by Yevgeniy Sharlat. That kind of surprise can be unsettling for a dancer, since so much of what he or she knows about a dance is connected to the music. Even now, long after they'd absorbed Sharlat's score, the dancers inhabited a world in which they appeared uncomfortable. The piece began in blackness, the music setting a haunting tone, like a mystery film. Several times, the lights came up on the cast of seven scattered in contorted shapes on the floor, then went out; when they came up again, the dancers had moved closer together. Dressed in casual rehearsal wear in sombre colors, they continued in the tortured vein that had been set by their opening shapes, giving us a strange, unsettling movement vocabulary—heads flung back, feet flexed, knees turned in. We weren't in pretty Lar Lubovitch world anymore.

The cinematic feeling that had taken hold at the beginning ran through the work. The experience was like watching an intimate ensemble drama, enacted in a style of purposeful ugliness. But even in ugliness Lubovitch found beauty; he created an idiom that reflected pain and even madness while revealing the human body's capacity for entrancing forms and shapes. The balletic line of "The Legend of Ten" gave way to a floppy, doll-like abandon; the happy unity was replaced by a broken anxiety. Katarzyna Skarpetowska and Brian McGinnis were the central pair here, and brilliantly led their compatriots in bedlam. (Anthony Bocconi, Nicole Corea, Attila Joey Csiki, Reed Luplau, and Laura Rutledge completed the cast.) McGinnis is an exceptional dancer, technically solid, with an admirably restrained stage presence; Skarpetowska has physical power and subtle dramatic gifts, beneath a deceptively sweet, girlish exterior.

The ungainliness of the movement went hand in hand with Sharlat's score, and the combination created a riveting unease. Small details drew the eye: McGinnis laying the back of his hand on Skarpetowska's chest, and later lifting her taut body slowly in the air, her feet turned in and crossed at the ankles. The two were on a fraught journey of some kind, and their perseverance was touching. You rooted for them. But it seemed as though the group was always watching, and you feared for the couple—a worry that was justified when, as an ending seemed near, and they had arrived at a place of some comfort, wrapped in an awkward embrace on the floor downstage, Skarpetowska was whisked out from under McGinnis, and disappeared into the group. The swell of emotion we get in Lubovitch's dances is often linked to his trademark swell of movement; here, a heartbreaking bit of choreography took the breath away.

For the program's world première, "Transparent Things," Lubovitch was inspired by "Family of Saltimbanques," a 1905 painting by Picasso, in which the artist placed six itinerant circus performers in a desolate landscape. Using Debussy's String Quartet in G Minor, Op 10—played here live by the Bryant Park Quartet—Lubovitch linked painting and music; Debussy's only string quartet, composed in 1893, left behind the rules of classical harmony, and Picasso, of course, was no stranger to iconoclasm.

Lubovitch brought this little band of entertainers to life with the help of the costume designer Reid Bartelme, who made canny versions of what the Picasso characters wear. The central figure, danced by Csiki, resembled a kind of Harlequin character, in gray pants and triangular-patterned top, and he

initiated the dance by nodding to the string quartet, who were seated on one side of the stage, prompting them to begin playing. In short order, he was joined by the five other saltimbanques—Skarpetowska (in a white dress and a black lace capelet), Luplau (in a bright-blue suit), McGinnis (in a red clown's outfit), Rutledge (in an orange skirt and white sweater), and Brown (in a beige leotard and brown pants)—and in a repeated snaking line, with intertwining arms, they introduced themselves as a kind of family.

The group gave an initial impression of contentment with their lot, as demonstrated by their carefree dancing, which had the fullness and vibrancy of vintage Lubovitch. But that changed in the third section, when the music became slow and melancholy. The six were arranged on the floor, and shifted into changing tableaux; often, two dancers in a group were held so that their legs, in attitude, pointed up, like human quotation marks. As the music quickened, Csiki, with unhinged movements that recalled those in “Crisis Variations,” danced a solo marked by preoccupation. Gone was the lightness we'd seen previously. The rest of the group followed suit, and the passage concluded with the dancers gathering around the musicians; Csiki gently laid his head on the cello as the last notes were played.

Although the mood brightened in the fourth and final movement, and the piece ended ecstatically—with the six, in a line, dropping into the splits, bowing their heads and then throwing them back—undercurrents of sadness, isolation, and alienation lingered at the edges of the work from beginning to end. But this seemed only natural. Any group of entertainers, though their intention is to make people happy and to give them a respite from their cares, is still just a collection of human beings. They have cares of their own, and often they're not far beneath the surface. Picasso certainly knew this; “Family of Saltimbanques” is a bleak, unsettling painting. And the leader of a band of performers—for example, a dance company known for giving pleasure through beauty—would know this, too.

Photograph by Paula Lobo.

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