

## Lar Lubovitch Raises a Jazz Soufflé

By **Deborah Jowitz** *Tuesday, Feb 23 2010*

When I think of Lar Lubovitch's choreography, the word "jazzy" doesn't come immediately to mind. Rather, I envision looping skeins of movement and a muscular lyricism. Dancers reach out and curve an arm overhead as if scooping up a volume of air. Their bodies bend in an invisible wind. When they frisk and gambol, they conjure up a wholesome, at times even goofy innocence.

Yet Lubovitch, whose company celebrated its 40th anniversary last year, has said in various interviews that he grew up loving jazz well before he decided to become a dancer. And his new *Coltrane's Favorite Things* admirably captures the quality that the choreographer has referred to as "sheets of sound"—evident in the live recording (made at the Coltrane Quartet's 1963 Copenhagen performance) that accompanies the dance. Only rarely do the steps reflect the exhilarating fist-in-your-face unprettiness that John Coltrane's arrangements often exude, but they ride the lazy heat of the music, and when Coltrane allows a fragment of the chipper, 6/8 Rodgers and Hammerstein tune to pop out from the turbulent clouds of sound, the dancers are ready to break into an impudent, bouncy waltz.



Erin Baiano

Copenhagen steppin': Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in "Coltrane's Favorite Things"

**Lar Lubovitch Dance Company.** Joyce Theater. February 23 through March 7

The music isn't Lubovitch's only inspiration. The backcloth behind the dancers is an enlarged rendering of Jackson Pollock's brown-on-gold *Autumn Rhythm (No. 30)*. The painting has its straight

slashes as well as its tangles of curves, but the overall effect is of a space bristling and seething with action. Lubovitch is a master of creating analogous swirls of movement. A cluster of dancers changes its internal structure the way individual vegetables boil around in a pot of soup. He may, for instance, keep a trio, a duo, and a soloist moving in close proximity and in flux, changing places and formations without breaking the flow; the patterns ride the music as if it were a wave.

Lubovitch also occasionally divides the wonderful dancers into groups that spell one another or merge. Charlaïne Mei Katsuyoshi, Brian McGinnis, Laura Rutledge, and Reid Bartelme form one unit; Jonathan Campbell, Attila Joey Csiki, and Christopher Vo another. The especially terrific Katarzyna Skarpetowska and Jonathan E. Alsberry explode in a fast, scrappy, shimmy of a duet to the wrangle of McCoy Tyner's piano, Jimmy Garrison's bass, and Elvin Jones's drums that ends with the dancers all tuckered out.

*Coltrane's Favorite Things* shares the first of the Joyce season's two programs with earlier pieces set to jazz: *Nature Boy*: Kurt Elling (previously titled *Love Stories*) and *Elemental Brubeck* (both from 2005). In the first, Elling's deep, limber voice climbs around the melodies of five American songbook tunes (culminating in the gorgeous "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"), and Lubovitch seems to concentrate less on the jazz underpinnings than on the emotions and characters expressed in the words of the songs. So in the title number, Vo is the sweetly feral "nature boy" that the others stare at apprehensively. Katsuyoshi and Alsberry skip fast and loose and friendly through "The More I Need You," Nicole Corea and Bartelme lament their partings in "Every Time We Say Goodbye," and at the end of the long, tense-with-desire duet for Skarpetowska and McGinnis to "Prelude to a Kiss," he rolls the top of her blouse down and buries his face in her neck. Although McGinnis upends his partner acrobatically a few too many times for my taste, their duet is full of other lovely and sensitive couplings, like the opening image in which Skarpetowska has grasped one ankle and bent her legs behind to turn herself into a necklace for him.

*Elemental Brubeck* closes the program with a burst of vigorous steps and patterns and very loud music. Pieces from Dave Brubeck's tremendous album *Time Changes* are played at a volume so loud that rather than imagining that you're hearing the Brubeck Quartet live on stage, you feel as if you're locked in a bathroom with the players. Csiki begins it with a virtuosic, but easygoing solo in which he flirts—rather coyly, I thought—with the audience. He's the leader of the revels, and it's for him that the others clap when the drums goad him into a more frenetic burst of movement. He's also the one left collapsed on stage, when the others have waltzed and swayed and wriggled and skittered out of their numerous happy pairings and groupings and into the wings.

*Coltrane's Favorite Things* is by far the finest work on the program. Lubovitch may dance to a different drummer, stylistically speaking, but his choreography has found the heartbeat in Coltrane's music and many of the spatial high jinks in Pollock's painting.