

The Washington Post

Lar Lubovitch Dance keeps smooth, fluid even in a work about disaster



(Matt McClain/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST) - Reed Luplau, with Katarzyna Skarpetowska in rehearsal Thursday, moved with relaxed grandeur.

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The Washington Post Published: November 30

Partway through Lar Lubovitch's jagged and unsettling piece called "Crisis Variations," one of the dancers flips his partner upside down and spins her on her head. This was one of the more lyrical moments.

Lubovitch, a painstaking craftsman with four decades of modern dance behind him, re-created the violent disorganization of trauma in this intriguing study, which his company performed along with three other works Thursday at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater. Bodies tumbled, limbs splayed and crumpled as if the stage were slipping out from under them. We watched the dancers whiplash joint by joint.

The music was an adversary. Just before the premiere last year, Lubovitch surprised his dancers with a sneaky swap: Instead of the Liszt etudes they had been rehearsing with, the choreographer substituted a loud, angry, abrasive suite by Yevgeniy Sharlat; we heard a recording of it at high volume. Now *that's* a crisis. Music is such a defining part of Lubovitch's work — he calls his

creative method “discovering a way to see the music” — that tampering with it becomes the worst calamity possible.

Yet even in a work about disaster, Lubovitch’s smooth, fluid stitching of one move to the next was consistent. This held true throughout the program, never more so than in “The Legend of Ten,” a 2010 piece that follows the melancholic swells and whorls of Brahms’s Piano Quintet in F Minor, Op. 34, so closely it could be the music’s shadow. Amid its undulating sea, Elisa Clark and Clifton Brown sailed in with a mysterious duet that was all silvery light.

Clark, who recently left the Mark Morris Dance Group, is a special prize; you cannot take your eyes from her, even as she melts into the ensemble and though the force of her attack is so light it is scarcely perceptible. Through some internal, finely controlled balance point, she can shade her steps with the illusion of weight and gravity one moment, then spin away in utter weightlessness the next. By her focus alone — the way she turned her head, a split-second look — the drama quickened.

Clark’s precision and elasticity were mirrored by the full cast, which comprised all 10 members of this company. These dancers are extraordinary movers, every one of them. You could feast on the relaxed grandeur of Attila Joey Csiki, Reed Luplau and especially Brian McGinnis, who seemed to be hiding a joke somewhere as he swam through “Little Rhapsodies,” an all-male threesome to the lush romanticism of Schumann’s Symphonic Etudes...

Yet the newest piece on the program — “Transparent Things,” which premiered in New York last month — was something of a departure. The chief luxury here was Debussy’s rich, shimmering String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10, played live by the Bryant Park Quartet, seated onstage with the dancers. The musicians were even part of the choreography, at one point finishing a movement with an exaggerated, full-body flourish.

More important, this work was about something other than a step-for-note reflection of the music. Lubovitch had a story to tell and, like the best stories, it was deeply personal. He was inspired by Picasso’s painting “Family of Saltimbanques,” which shows a clan of street performers caught in a moment of inscrutable introspection, each one isolated inside his or her thoughts.

For Lubovitch, as he explained in a post-performance question-and-answer session, this struck a chord. Picasso caught the paradox of the dancer’s life: superhuman in the public eye, but in private, exhausted, vulnerable, tender, human.

So we saw a close-knit group of dancers moving through various emotional states, noodling around in compelling moments of delight and poignancy. At one point, the dancers crept close to the musicians and knelt at their feet, enthralled like children, or perhaps paying homage to their muse. They, like their director, had located the point of their dancing. And a work with a point is more interesting to watch than one without.