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What Becomes a Legend Most

"North Star," "Duet from Meadow," "The Legend of Ten," "Coltrane's Favorite Things"

Lar Lubovitch Dance Company

Baryshnikov Arts Center

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By Martha Sherman

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After an illustrious 42-year career, Lar Lubovitch's strengths might be predictable, but he hasn't lost his touch either. The world premiere of "The Legend of Ten" at Baryshnikov Arts Center was another celebration of his meticulous, fluid movement, danced by the latest group of graceful and disciplined dancers with which he consistently replenishes his troupe. With the generational passing of so many of the great twentieth century choreographers, Lubovitch stands even more firmly as a pillar of contemporary dance. He takes that responsibility as seriously as he always has.

The beauty of Lubovitch's movement is familiar and dependable. This program, including the world premiere "Legend" and his earlier 2010 work, "Coltrane's Favorite Things," also offered a historical perspective by opening with "North Star," (1978) and a short excerpt from the 1999 "Meadow," created for the American Ballet Theatre. Through decades of choreography, the sampled movement was beautiful. Lubovitch's signatures still include swooping arms with wide arcs like wings. The dancers lead the movement with their arms or heads; in the full company scenes, they form a tide coming in and washing out, backed up by perfect balletic training and strength.

Lubovitch used widely diverse music (including scores by Phillip Glass, Johannes Brahms and John Coltrane) to frame the motion in different ways. Jack Mehler's lighting in the simple black box of BAC's Howard Gilman Performance Space was a repetition of spotlight pools interspersed with a light-dappled stage in three of the four pieces.

The choreography moved between large group segments and smaller solos, duets and trios in a weighing of tradeoffs. The momentum of the company, often dancing in perfect parallel, was powerful and focused. To achieve that synchrony, most of the movement was horizontal, the crowd

shifting in lock-step, like a school of fish or a natural herd in an intuitive connection. In the early “North Star,” the dancers’ energy built on the relentless press of Glass’s score, then used a “crack the whip” movement to shift the energy, pulling and pushing one or a few dancers held and flung by the rest of the line. In “The Legend of Ten,” although the grouped dances built on different particular movements (swinging arms in a sowing movement, or the bodies all flung as one onto the floor at the close of the first Brahms movement,) the horizontal flow, too, felt familiar.



The duets and trios take on vertical space, and are filled with the angular lifts that Lubovitch has always been master of – the jagged lines of a cantilevered leg thrust up from a partner’s shoulder, or the woman balanced by the head and shoulders of her partner instead of lifted in his arms, as in the “Meadow” duet with Katarzyna Skarpetowska and Brian McGinnis. Even when Jenna Fakhoury and Reid Bartelme were on the ground in “Legend of Ten,” the links between their bodies created unexpected planes in space: a pair of intertwined spiders slinking across the floor on their backs. The innovative geometry of Lubovitch’s pairings is still a delicious puzzle. In these, he finds new ways to show the counterbalancing tension and magnetism of complex relationships.

Lubovitch’s musicality hewed closely to each of the scores, the first three providing different lyrical rhythms. “Coltrane’s Favorite Things” (2010) offered an upbeat close to the program, the choreography leaning just as strongly on the idiosyncratic jazz score. In their well-matched duets, Skarpetowska and Jonathan E. Alsberry radiated energy, their affect and physical sparring echoing the ease and lightness of Coltrane’s wending solos. The flashes of humor embedded in the piece seemed less in the carefully crafted dance than in the obvious pleasure of the dancers. The lighting finally changed, too, to a jazzier, livelier palate of colored floor lighting.

Thirty years ago, when I started watching dance in New York City, Lubovitch was my favorite choreographer. These pieces, and all this flowing movement reminded me of my early education in dance and called on that nostalgia.

As the house darkened before each piece, Lubovitch slipped into the audience perching on the stairs to watch, an attentive shepherd. The dancers’ careful patterns, the ebbs and flows of the company of ten, and the more lively pairings, clearly form a direct line to his vision and aesthetic. That his touch has remained this consistent after decades of dance creation doesn’t detract from the essential discipline and loveliness of the movement. Few choreographers caress music so tenderly with their dance.

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Top Photo: Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in "North Star" by Todd Rosenberg

Bottom Photo: Jenna Fakhoury and Reid Bartelme in "The Legend of Ten" by Paula Lobo

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