

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## Silky Ballet Solos and Irresistible Tapping Toes Close Fall for Dance

The New York City Center festival presented exceptional works by Alexei Ratmansky and Ayodele Casel, including a captivating premiere.

By Gia Kourlas

Oct. 24, 2021

When Fall for Dance checks all the boxes and puts on a satisfying show, you can't help but feel a sense of euphoria about the art form and its myriad possibilities. But it's rare. The New York City Center festival, popular for its eclectic programs and inexpensive tickets, can also make you feel a little sick to your stomach — it's like being at a buffet and making the terrible decision to gorge on sushi, pizza and every last dessert on the menu.



Joseph Gordon and Adrian Danchig-Waring perform Lar Lubovitch's "Each in His Own Time." Credit...Stephanie Berger

For once, on the fourth program seen Friday, the best piece garnered the most applause: Lar Lubovitch's "Each in His Own Time." Adrian Danchig-Waring and Joseph Gordon, two principal dancers at City Ballet, began separated in spotlights at first, not dancing but listening to the pianist, Susan Walters, as she played selections from Brahms's Eight Piano Pieces (Op. 76).

As with "Fandango," the music was as much a part of the piece as the dancing, giving this City Center commission the feeling of a trio. Walters's sparkling performance propelled the dancers into motion; they curled their arms and linked hands, almost making a chain with only two bodies. Their dancing

— florid, continuous, unsentimental — grew larger as they explored the stage with light jumps and darting, tight spins. But this intimate, luminous world remained contained; the performers didn't look out, they looked in, as if dancing only for each other.



Members of BalletX perform “Mapping Out a Sky.” Credit...Stephanie Berger

Not everything was as sophisticated. In “Mapping Out a Sky” a New York premiere for the Philadelphia company BalletX, the choreographer Matthew Neenan took an architectural approach to the structure, delivering movement that flickered between a formal investigation of time and space and something altogether more jazzy — cloyingly so. But the dancers of BalletX were appealing. One of the most charming moments of the evening came when two of them — Ashley Simpson and Blake Krapels — made a surprise cameo in the spirited, swinging “Meet Ella,” a last-minute addition by Caleb Teicher and Nathan Bugh. Walking onto the stage in their “Mapping” costumes, they found themselves lost in someone else's dance, a delightful joke for the way they played into it.

On the previous evening, “Meet Ella” had replaced a work by Lil Buck, who was prevented from performing because of an issue regarding Covid-19 protocols. On Friday, Buck made it onstage in “38109,” another presentation with Vail. Named after his Memphis ZIP Code — where he first learned his chosen movement language, the street dance of jookin — Buck unveiled a personal piece with music, again by Shaw, and his own text.

In near darkness, he first moved his arms, which braided together at his head, before making his way to the middle of the stage to a pair of pristine sneakers. After slipping them on, he rose with a spin and nimbly balanced on his toes. Undulating his arms like ribbons as his feet carried him across the stage, Buck showed what a spectacular dancer he is. But as for the work itself? Opaque and not much longer than a music video, it fizzled out before it really got started.

But what also left me hanging was the realization that over the course of two nights and seven works, only one was created by a female choreographer. And what if Casel wasn't as brilliant an artist as she is? Would she have made it at all? This counting routine — keeping track of the male-female ratio of choreographers — may be getting old, but it's clear that we have a long way to go before we're done.

Gia Kourlas is the dance critic of The New York Times.

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 25, 2021, Section C, Page 3 of the New York edition with the headline: Silky Ballet Solos and Irresistible Tapping Toes.