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REVIEW

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*San Francisco Ballet**Program IV:*

*'Jardin aux Lilas (Lilac Garden)',
'The Concert',
'On a Theme of Paganini'*

*March 2009**San Francisco, Opera House**by Renee Renouf*

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The rain has temporarily, one hopes, given way to sunny skies and Program 4 seems timed to make the most of it, providing emotional content with two 20th century classics. Created some twenty years apart by two master ballet psychologists, an ocean apart, Lilac Garden and The Concert reflect a sea change in permissible behavior, particularly for women.

Jardin aux Lilas or Lilac Garden is such an enduring ballet; I saw Nora Kaye as Caroline with Hugh Lang, later Martine Von Hamel as The Woman in his Past. Except for the liquidity of her movement, Lorena Feijoo came close to that passionate, subdued desperation admirably, if she missed the particular edge Kaye managed to infuse in all her roles. Pierre-Francois Vilanoba did an admirable job as The Man She Must Marry; he conveys brooders with enormous finesse, or men with something to hide like Sofiane Sylve's Woman From His Past. Reuben Martin did not seem sufficiently desolate over the pending loss of his love; I would like to see Matteo Kleinmeyer essay the role. Nutnaree Pipit-Suksun was pitch-perfect in the smaller role as Caroline's

friend, interceding with compassion for both parties. I hope she graduates into the Caroline role in the future. Sylve's attack, authoritatively desperate, contrasted with the suppliant angst of Feijoo's role; how turbulent that relationship had been with Vilanoba's character was revealed by fierce, terse gestures of attempted denial or the manner in which he curled Caroline's fingers inward to her palms. Was



Caroline's family fortune on the ropes? One easily speculates on a variety of motives leading to this nascent human debacle, whether it forecasts more clandestine meetings post-established domestic tensions.

The Ballet West lent costumes were too freshly bright, particularly The Woman in His Past, a deep, somehow bright purple and the black and white polka-dots in the other two women. I remember The Lover's tunic as a deeper blue. The sets seemed to match my memory.

Jerome Robbins had a special affinity for Chopin; in 1956, supported by Edward Gorey's décor and Irene Sharoff's minimal costumes, he created a rare comic classic among contemporary ballets. It must be one invariably programmed as the final number; any thing following would be a let down, pretentious or a bore. Mounted by the company in 1987, its revival is overlong but welcomed with ripples, then waves of laughter.

Michael McGraw, the company pianist, made a supercilious entrance; the adjustment of his stool and dusting the piano keys; the kerchief released waves of talcum and first ripples from the audience. The first listener is spectacled, pre nerd introvert, glaring at the two girls arriving with their chairs, chatting, making noises with a purse. They are followed by a flowing-haired Sarah Van Patten in the role created by Tanaquil Le Clerq. She brings her chair to the end of the grand piano leaning rapturously against its side. Next comes Danielle Santos, a no-nonsense listener with glasses and a frown; Pascal Molat with cigar provides moments of Groucho Marx bravado with alternate ultimate, the shrew-driven spouse to Erin McNulty's commandeering wife. It is a romp from start to finish for dancers and audience. It should be revived twice a decade, minimum.



Erin McNulty and Pascal Molat in Robbins' *The Concert*
© Erik Tomasson



Helgi Tomasson's *On a Theme of Paganini* commenced the program with Martin Pakledinaz' lederhosen-inspired vests for the men, cutting the line of torso to leg.

The elegant cast assembled to dance with equal panache included Maria Kochetkova, Vanessa Zahorian, Taras Domitro, Davit Karapetyan and Pascal Molat.

Tomasson's strongest suit remains his capacity with a pas de deux and an understanding of motivations as witnessed when Kochetkova and Karapetyan danced the pas de deux to the most ecstatic variation with their unusual harmony. Karapetyan conveys a visceral relish in virtually everything he dances as does Molat. Zahorian was flanked by Domitro and Molat; these principals' pairing was intriguing, matching in execution, bodies lending different visual dynamics, Zahorian provided her usual musical ease and pleasure.

Some thoughts added later...

Three casts have essayed San Francisco Ballet's inaugural production of Anthony Tudor's *Jardin Aux Lilas*; they are so very different. Of the three the most emotionally affecting remain with Lorena Feijoo as Caroline, Pierre-Francois Vilanoba, Sofiane Sylve, although I found myself less touched by Ruben Martin as *The Lover* as previously mentioned. The third cast, like the first, possesses a remarkable trio, but a diminution with the fourth in the tangled quartet.

Opposite Tina LeBlanc, Pascal Molat as *The Lover* was tender and mournful, she desperately resigned; Pauli Magierek directly emotional as *The Woman from His Past* had tough sledding against Aaron Orza's rock-like *Man She Must Marry*. Against Orza, LeBlanc was restrained yet frantic. This cast exhibited the most uniform attack, restrained, suggesting Anglo social restraints.

Sarah Van Patten's *Caroline* is young, sensuality subdued but most suggestive that outer pressures are forcing this situation. She and Davit Karapetyan as *The Lovers* managed particularly impressive stops, starts, head turns and pauses; one felt the furtive urgency of their meetings. There was a tightness in Karapetyan's face and Van Patten's solo relevés seemed to speak her thoughts, "How can I do this? How can I leave him?" Against the lovers Ivan Popov as *The Man She Must Marry* possessed a spine of rigid steel, conveying in the opening pose and movement, those possessive encircling gestures a distinct absence of remorse or sympathy. He seemed a lion of industry; sharp, successful, disliked by workers and colleagues. Alana Altman as *The Woman From His Past* cuts an elegant and impressive figure, but did not match the intrinsic emotional verity, or intensity of her three colleagues, nor experienced major frustration. Nutnaree Pipit-Suksun reinforced her initial impression, deepening at all three viewings.





Lorena Feijoo and Pierre-François Vilanoba in Tudor's *Jardin aux Lilas*
© Erik Tomasson



In The Concert's second viewing, except for two title roles, the cast remained the same; by the penultimate performance it was played with nonchalance, brilliantly. Oh, God, the genius of Robbins, his devilish foolery and the divine time he must have had with Tanaquil LeClerq as his muse. Vanessa Zahorian and Ruben Martin assumed the roles of the Ballerina and The Husband in the second viewing; she ditsy and wild eyed where Van Patten conveyed a misfit romantic dithering with estrogen. Martin's physique shriveled appreciably with Erin McNulty's thrusts, giving his character something of Al Jolson breadth along with the wild gleam and the fanny pets. The third viewing returned Van Patten and Molat to the title roles.

The second viewing of On a Theme of Paganini paired Yuan Yuan Tan and Rachel Viselli as the women, Taras Dimitro, Tiit Helimets and Hansuke Yamamoto as the three men. In physical size Tan and Viselli are well matched; Tan's spiky, crystalline brilliance contrasted with Viselli's liquid phrasing and lyric capacities. Helimets classicism was best framed when partnering Tan; his solo seemed strangely awkward, the required postures stilted, I suspect because his classicism is so self-effacing. I felt something similar in Yamamoto's brief solo, not something displaying him well, despite his good support in the pas de trios with Viselli and Dimitro. The third viewing reverted to the first cast.

I should go on record here to say that this particular program made particular demands on some principals who danced two ballets, I add brilliantly. That roster included Molat, Karapetyan, Van Patten. To date Program IV has been 2009's highlight.

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