
New piece 'Elemental Brubeck' puts S.F. Ballet in a buoyant early '60s mood

- Janice Berman, Special to The Chronicle
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First performed in July in Paris, "Elemental Brubeck," created by Lar Lubovitch for the San Francisco Ballet, had its hometown premiere Tuesday night at the War Memorial Opera House.

Set to three pieces created by Brubeck in 1963 for his recording "Time Changes" and led by Gonzalo Garcia, soloing in a bright red jumpsuit, it was a festive, knockout display, joyously evoking some of the greatest moments of American dance on film. Garcia, tirelessly hoofing with the brio of a Gene Kelly, the musicality of Fred Astaire and the airborne insouciance of, well, Garcia, set up departure points for the duo of Stephen Legate and Katita Waldo, and for the sextet of three women and three men who formed the Combo.

The steps were buoyant and fresh, managing simultaneously to surprise and to bring back memories of old moves from old movies, aided by Paul Desmond's wistful alto sax as much as by Brubeck's piano.

Jazzy and beboppy, jittery and glittery, the articulations of fabled dancemakers like Kelly, Bob Fosse and Gower Champion were all present and accounted for. Fingers fluttered on imaginary piano keyboards; shoulders shrugged; hips switched through a mambo moment. Costume designer Ann Hould Ward wittily fitted Audrey Hepburn's turned-up collar from "Funny Face," Cyd Charisse's slinky turtleneck dress from "Silk Stockings" and the little shirtwaists of Debbie Reynolds harmoniously onto one corps de ballet; Jack Mehler designed the lighting.

Lubovitch, whose "Othello" (1998) and "Smile With My Heart" (2005) are also in the company's repertory, seems here to have reached back for his youth, when he watched what were to be among the last great movie musicals and, perhaps, was inspired to go into

dance. It was a great idea.

Christopher Wheeldon's fascinating "Continuum" is a magisterial combination of whimsy and beauty. It was highlighted by the supple, nuanced performances of Yuan Yuan Tan and her partner, Damian Smith. In Yuri Possokhov's "Reflections," the third-movement solo, performed by Guennadi Nedviguine, gave an underused artist a chance to shine.

San Francisco Ballet: Program 8 repeats at 8 p.m. Friday, 2 p.m. Sunday and 1 and 8 p.m. May 6. War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. Tickets: \$10-\$199. Call (415) 865-2000 or visit www.sfballet.org.

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Stephen Legate and Katita Waldo in the local premiere of Lar Lubovitch's "Elemental Brubeck."
Chronicle photo by Kim Komenich



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Yuan Yuan Tan and Damian Smith dance "Continuum." Chronicle photo by Kim Komenich



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Lorena Feijoo, left and Kristin Long dance "Reflections." Chronicle photo by Kim Komenich



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