thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: Alexander Iziliaev

BalletX in Flight

by Lisa Kraus

I imagine that most audience members seeing *Sunset, o639 hours* experienced it the way I did—as a dreamlike adventure tale full of magical effects, spirited dancing and satisfyingly varied and wonderfully-played music. I wanted to relax and let it wash over me, and not wonder too hard about sequence or specifics. Yes, it centers on a real life event—the first-ever flight of Captain Edwin Musick from New Zealand to Hawaii, which ended in a crash on the return journey. But this reference serves as an open-ended jumping off point for portrayals of the social dances of the day (1937), a plane flying (through the windmilling arms of ten dancers in appropriate formation), a tribal circle, amorous couples in proximity and over long-distance, and the flora and fauna of the South Seas.

The show represents the second highly successful collaboration of choreographer Matthew Neenan with composer/musician Rosie Langabeer. The dancers of BalletX and the musicians joining Langabeer onstage deliver superlative performances full of heart, energy and playfulness. Maiko Matsushima's set leaves the stage space free by flying overhead like fragments of a plane or a Calder sculpture exploded and melted into softly undulating sheets. Light striking these elements, or darkening behind them, works wonders, making a deep night sky or an aquamarine water world.

Likewise, the dancers' costumes shift simply from one mood to another. With gray color-block leotards as a base, the women easily slip into filmy pants or evening dresses or even hula skirts. Toe shoes, worn initially, give way to bare feet. The men, mostly in crisp pants and simple shirts, morph also from gents on a night out, to flight crew, to guys lolling on the beach.

As for variety in the dances themselves, this piece resembles many traditional story ballets where the central tale provides an armature for a variety of dance styles or divertissements (think of the Spanish dancers in *Nutcracker*, or the court entertainments in other works). Here there's room for some hula, some animal studies and a highlight— varied social dance duets that unfold one after another, then pile up for a dense and delicious finale. The speed of the ballroom partners is exhilarating, and the dancers are invested deeply. Chloe Felesina, who portrays the wife of Captain Musick (Zachary Kapeluck) is quicksilver: light, swift and lovely. Neenan's steps give them lots to attend to—tiny hip swivels within larger arcing moves, ripples up the torso, jittery hand gestures, momentary heel flexes and seriously up-tempo beats.

Overall, the physicality is elongated, lifted and sinuous, so the study of Maori movement mentioned in the program notes is felt only in momentary flashes when, for instance, the dancers drop down to wide-stanced pliés with percussive gestures.

Spectacle has perennial appeal. But how do you make fresh story ballet for the 21st century? This evening-length piece, along with Neenan's earlier collaboration with Langabeer, *Proliferation of the Imagination (2011),*
reveals one strategy: push the synergy of dance/music/drama/setting to the max. Here the dancers sing, creating a fullness of sound and harmony. One dancer gets down on drums, the musicians parade or stroll through the action, and respond, sensitively, to the very ebb and flow of the dance's dynamics.

In an interview of Neenan some years back I asked where he begins his dance making process. He cited the choice of music. Rufus Wainwright and Shostakovich are two greats who've brought out his strengths. But the back and forth with Langabeer, whose own voice figures largely in love songs full of wistful yearning and completion, is golden. She plucks sound snippets from everywhere, evoking insect creatures, the very movement of earth and sea, sounds of machinery whirring and working—engines and electronica. The blast of brass, the thrum of strings.

In *Sunset, o639 hours* there's no mime. And only once is there melodrama, in the final duet of Captain and wife, a spectral, overacted dance of missing connection. I wished the dance hadn't ended on her, pulling her head sideways in an expression of grief and disorientation. It makes sense logically, but the work seems otherwise dedicated to following the logic of dreams rather than something so prosaic.

I have sat in the Academy of Music with ladies next to me speaking about Neenan as if he were their very own—a beloved local hero. Matt. Audiences cheer for his works which light a special kind of firework for the dancers, often deliver chuckles, convey tenderness and musicality, and at times bring new twists to partnering with bold traverses, deep sweeps and inventive filigrees. But the Neenan I cheer for most is the one who is able to go out on a limb, and then take off, just like this.

Sunset, o639 hours, BalletX, Wilma Theater, July 9-13. http://www.balletx.org

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