thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: A. Iziliaev

Sunbathers, Sailors, and Society Wives: Robbins at PAB

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

At his pre-show conversation with the audience Thursday evening, Jean-Pierre Frohlich—a ballet master with the Robbins Rights Trust—commented that Jerome Robbins's work is more akin to a play than to a dance: each character has a backstory, the movements are like an actor's lines, always unfolding in a specific time and place. Those people, their stories, and their settings sprang to life at Pennsylvania Ballet's *Tribute to Jerome Robbins*.

The evening opened with *In G Major* (1975, New York City Ballet), to Ravel's Piano Concerto in G major, which Frohlich told his listeners is also known as "En Sol" for its sunny, seaside setting (by Erté) and its playful mood. Perhaps a nod to Bronislava Nijinska's *Le Train Bleu* (1924, Paris), Robbins set his bathing-suit-clad dancers in a world of waves, expansive sweeping moments spiced with sparkling-swift sporty gestures and occasional folksy stepping. The contrasting diagonals and deceptively simple walking pas de deux, performed by Lauren Fadeley and James Ihde, morphs into etched lifts and shared enchainements, bringing emotional complexity and depth to the dance. Robbins ultimately intertwines this graver romance with the lighthearted play of the corps, as youth must move toward maturity.

The centerpiece of the evening was the Robbins-Bernstein hit *Fancy Free* (premiere 1944, American Ballet Theatre), where the dance-characters spring across—and nearly off—the stage. All three sailors who lead the ballet—played by Ian Hussey, Alexander Peters, and Arián Molina Soca—are richly three-dimensional. Each came from somewhere to this moment of wartime leave in Manhattan, they are out to get something (girls, in this story), and each has a particular movement signature (swinging tilts for Hussey, hunched and grounded punches for Peters, and hip-swiveling insouciance for Soca). The angular, exaggerated perspectives of Oliver Smith's set—a bar, a street lamp, and a city-lights backdrop—establish the rhythmic drive of the music and dancing, which also included Marria Cosentino as the girl with the red purse, Lillian Di Piazza as the girl in the purple dress, and Kelsey Hellebuyck as the late-comer in

blue. The lovely costumes are by Kermit Love.

Delightful as was *Fancy Free*, the hilarity of *The Concert* (1956, New York City Ballet) made it the perfect choice for concluding the evening on a high note. PAB's dancers embrace their characters (caricatures, in fact) with gusto—Brooke Moore as the witchy society wife; Ian Hussey as her cigar-chomping, eye-roaming husband; Amy Aldridge the swooning romantic chickadee; and a swarm of nerds, angsty artists, candy-unwrapping ladies, and more. Martha Koeneman, the onstage pianist playing Chopin's evocative music, is perfection as she dusts the piano keys, wanders amongst the dancers, and undergirds the musical fantasies of each character with attention and eloquence. I laughed so hard at several of the scenes that I was in tears, particularly watching the messed-up corps de ballet and the husband-turned-butterfly scenes. The dancing, the timing, the exuberance, and—not to be forgotten—the poetic beauty of this concert were spot-on.

Angel Corella, PAB's still-new artistic director, spoke briefly before the curtain to announce the upcoming season, the first he will design for the company. While the mix of new works and *Nutcracker*, Balanchine and Christopher Wheeldon is not unlike the mixed bills PAB and other major ballet companies regularly present, it also promises sparks, bringing new choreographic voices to this company's stage—Trisha Brown, Liam Scarlett, and Corella's own staging of *Don Quixote*. The company has been dancing exceptionally well this season, several dancers rising to new heights of both precision and expression. I'm eager to see them in 2015-16 in a season etched even more sharply by Corella's vision.

Tribute to Jerome Robbins, Pennsylvania Ballet, Academy of Music, May 7-10, https://www.paballet.org/current-season

By Lynn Matluck Brooks
May 13, 2015