

ABT & ASFB send in **the clowns** for **ballet renewal**

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by debra levine



James Whiteside (Harlequin), Thomas Forster (Pierrot)
photo credit: [Andrea Mohin / The New York Times](#)

The tears of a clown rained down all weekend at **Segerstrom Center for the Arts** in the West Coast premiere of **American Ballet Theatre's** triumphant reconstruction, *Harlequinade*. The dashing pair of *Commedia del'arte* clowns pictured above, the diamond-suited Harlequin and sad-faced Pierrot, took top billing. But by the end of this seamlessly entertaining, beautifully danced pageant — an inspired labor of love by choreographer **Alexei Ratmansky** with marvelous sets and costumes by **Robert Perdziola** — the clowns smiled. And so did a heck of a lot of people in a delighted audience, including this dance critic, who watched the entire spectacle with something akin to a dumb grin on her face.

Lighter than froth, nuttier than a fruitcake, and with visual charm equal to a deck of vintage playing-cards sprung to life, *Harlequinade* was a gift all around. As mentioned, first and foremost, a gift for the audience, touching the precise tone of universality that has kept the *Commedia* figurines compelling since the 1600s. But in resuscitating this daunting Petipa two-act work dating from 1900, Mr. Ratmansky also offered a heap-big gift to the ABT dancers. He tapped their dormant talents: We had dancers pantomiming

with clarity; dancers as actors, remember that? We watched dancers use their physiques for farce; dancers connecting to the art form's antiquity. We watched with joy as they bent the well-trod shapes of American-style ballet classicism, embellishing with fillips, little twists and turns, fol-de-rol, and twinkle-toes. ABT, please continue to mine this broad spectrum of your dancers' capabilities.



Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, "Dream Play" choreographer Fernando Melo, photo: Sharon Bradford

More grin-inducing pleasure came from a performance at the far, other end of the Southern California dance map, the **Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts** (the erstwhile Valley Performing Arts Center at Cal State Northridge, now known as "The Soraya"). There, Saturday evening, the wonderful **Aspen Santa Fe Ballet** completed its fourth season as resident dance company.

After thoroughly enjoying (what's not to love in this witty escapade) choreographer **Fernando Melo's** *Dream Play*, an edgy interchange between technology and dance dating from 2017, my first thought was, "In three-to-five years, ABT will be doing this." An ABT-familiar friend replied dryly, "I'd put it at five."

You need the vision and versatility of an artistic director like **Tom Mossbrucker** and his 'make-it-happen' co-director **Jean-Philippe Malaty** to understand that a work like Melo's high-tech adventure relies on pinpoint accuracy and a supreme level of technical control endemic to classically trained dancers.

Dream Play has ASFB's high-voltage dancers, race horses each, in an amusing mode. They lie on backs and sides, on the floor. Scuttling around, they link up, flip over, and get dragged from side to side, sometimes by outside helpers. It sounds awfully dusty, but hey, it's all being filmed from an overhead perspective and then projected onto a screen in real time. And on that screen transpires an endearing, gentle high-wire act set to music by Erik Satie.

Indeed, for his *trompe d'oeil* exercise, Melo turns to the circus — tightrope walkers, twirling umbrellas, ladies tippy-toeing neatly on the palm of a man's outstretched hand. As viewers, you are flipping back and forth, up and down, floor to screen, because you don't know where to laugh first.

The more traditionally virtuoso skills of the ASFB dancers kicked in right after the Melo, with a blazing rendition of Jorma Elo's crackerjack *First Flash* (2007), to music by Sibelius. Joseph Watson and Pete Leo Walker, two very big fellows, moved in tick-tock tandem, as standouts.



The lady on the tightrope in Fernando Melo "Dreamplay" for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Laughing ha ha ha at the ballet? Hell yes! Both concerts reflect an art form in a much overdue shake-up and dust-off. We have such great dancers, all dressed up, and it's time to give them someplace to go. ABT is pursuing renewal, ironically, by reaching back in time; Aspen Santa Fe Ballet by integrating modern technologies. How hopeful this makes us; how it augurs a revival of profound ballet creativity.

It's a pity that Benjamin Millepied, who was such a fine classical dancer, is not part of this revival. He's not. He's practicing mish-mosh 'contemporary.' [Read about that here.](#)