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DANCE REVIEW

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet looks sharp at Jacob's Pillow

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Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's Craig Black and Emily Proctor in Alejandro Cerrudo's "Silent Ghost."

BECKET — Wednesday night marked the opening of Jacob's Pillow's 84th season (with new Pillow director Pamela Tatge) as well as Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's sixth visit. It was a pleasure to see that this company, at 20, continues to maintain quality in the most important ingredients: the dancers and the dances.

The dancers are, as ever, eager and malleable in the right ways: always in the service of the choreographer, but with palpable individualities.

As to the choreographers, two that appear on this week's program, Spaniards Alejandro Cerrudo and Cayetano Soto, have other pieces in the Aspen Santa Fe repertoire, which isn't a bad thing. But in Aspen's recent appearances there has been a sameness to the dances, despite their different authors; this has been the trend with many companies.

Happily, the three works in Aspen's Pillow concert this time out — all company commissions — are sharply delineated, with Cerrudo's 2015 "Silent Ghost" and Soto's "Huma Rojo" bookending Brazilian choreographer Fernando Melo's "Re:play." The latter two dances premiered earlier this year.

"Silent Ghost," with music by Ólafur Arnalds, King Creosote & Jon Hopkins, Nils Frahm, and Dustin Hamman, manages to be somber rather than sentimental. Lit in enigmatic, shadowy episodes by Michael Korsch, the movement is draped in an aching softness. In the three main duets, the dancers crawl under and over each other, as if protecting or carving out physical memories of their partners. A woman bends her head and upper body into a deep curve, as if bowing humbly to another woman; within two male/female duets, the woman is sometimes lifted, her legs sweeping open with a gorgeous slowness. In one motif, a dancer lifts an arm straight up, then the other; a moment later his or her partner reaches for the raised arms. In the first iteration, the dancer slips through her partner's reach and falls to the ground; later a man lowers his arms to embrace and then lift his partner. It is a beautiful, quiet dance that never spells out the death in the title, but instead depicts the tenderness that often surrounds loss.

In "Re:play," a sense of déjà vu develops through the visual trickery of Seah Johnson's lighting design — reportedly composed of 700 cues — and Melo's patterning for the 10 dancers. With each crisply timed blackout, the cast is quickly shuffled so that when we see them again, they've either backed up to a previous position as if we're watching a film that's been rewound, or they disappear. Initially, as the disorienting snippets build, "Re:play" captivates. Are these jumbled snapshots of a crime? Maybe we are seeing the daily banality of city dwellers who walk by but fail to see each other. Alas, whatever Melo's intention, the dance itself sputters, the initially compelling visual concept now just a neat idea.

Though Soto's "Huma Rojo" ("red smoke") likewise runs out of choreographic ideas, this saucy, irresistible dance never runs out of steam. Taking their cues from the droll opening voice-over extolling the supposed attractiveness of a big ego, the ensemble preen, pose, and dance in purposely exaggerated fashion. The dancers puff out their chests, jut their chins, and sashay their hips insouciantly to the medley of songs by Ray Barretto, Nat "King" Cole, Abbe Lane, and the orchestras of Xavier Cugat and Pérez Prado. The dancers' fingers are shaped into tense spikes; they seem to be both attacking us and keeping us at bay with their hip hauteur. Toward the end, their cool masks show signs of warmth; a man's head shakes, ridiculously subtle; yearning appears in another's eyebrows; a smile breaks through here and there. The dancers finally are just feeling what we've been experiencing the whole time: unabashed joy.

ASPEN SANTA FE BALLET

At Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Becket, through Sunday.

Tickets: \$45-\$75. 413-243-0745, www.jacobspillow.org

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