

Country dancing: ASFB & Juan Siddi at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

Michael Wade Simpson | Posted: Friday, July 1, 2016 5:00 am



Craig Black and Emily Proctor in Silent Ghost; photo Hayim Heron

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, Ted Shawn Theatre, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, June 22

Juan Siddi Flamenco Santa Fe, Doris Duke Theatre, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, June 23

It was a little “viva Santa Fe” in Western Massachusetts during the 84th-season opening of Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, from June 22 to June 26, where Aspen Santa Fe Ballet and its sister company, Juan Siddi Flamenco Santa Fe, were headliners. ASFB performed on the mainstage, the Ted Shawn Theatre, a big remodeled barn that comes with high-tech theatrical capabilities, but also has a few rustic touches as well as well as an alfresco crossover space for dancers changing sides backstage. Siddi's group appeared in the Doris Duke Theatre, a smaller, newer black-box space where the companies presented tend to be up-and-coming.

Jacob's Pillow is not far from Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, on a former farm on a leafy hill in Becket. The Pillow has won the National Medal of Arts, is a National Historic Landmark, and has been called “the dance center of the nation”

by *The New York Times*. During the daytime, preprofessional student dancers learn from master teachers in several genres. There are morning dance classes open to the public, free performances every night on a glassy dance floor overlooking woods and a valley, a public reading room where one can watch videos and explore a collection of dance pioneer Ruth St. Denis memorabilia. There are lectures, tours, and exhibits — it's total immersion into an art form in a pastoral setting. Audience members come early to dine in the open-air restaurant, bring a picnic, or stroll among the barn-board cabins, studios, and offices — all surrounded by verdant gardens.

ASFB presented the same program Santa Fe saw in April. It was an opportunity to take another stab at figuring out the enigmatic *Re:play*, the new Fernando Melo piece in which people walk back and forth, the lights fade on and off a lot, and the music is repetitious in all the most unlistenable ways. Sadie Brown, dressed in a dowdy white skirt and blouse, is the center of this stripped-down universe, with pedestrian movement, repetition, jump cuts, bodies on the ground, and partnering by the throat. Rapturous dance it's not, and yet ... the piece is edgy and thought-provoking, and the lighting by Seah Johnson is brilliant.

Cayetano Soto's *Huma Rojo* is supposed to be funny. It has an Xavier Cugat-style lounge-music score, dancers in tomato-red outfits, and a choreographic cookie-cutter look to it, as if the wink-wink style of the dance was more important to Soto than movement invention. There were a lot of crossovers and chorus lines. Soto assigned the autobiography of Joan Rivers to the dancers in preparation for the piece and was inspired by Pedro Almodóvar's film *All About My Mother*. Campiness does make itself known here. I was drawn to Łukasz Zieba, new to Aspen, who studied at a dance academy in Kraków and at New York's Alvin Ailey school; he performed with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet before joining AFSB. In *Huma Rojo* he showed off some of that Ailey sizzle. Pete Leo Walker also enjoyed playing the showman in the Soto piece and strutted like a voguer.

In *Silent Ghost*, the dancers wear socks for shoes, and sliding is essential to the movement vocabulary. Other extended periods for the ballerinas are spent inch-worming along the floor. AFSB dancers excel in the organic, earthy way of moving that Alejandro Cerrudo asks of them. Two quiet duets at the center of the piece help personalize and emotionalize the dance. It was the strongest work on the program.

The Juan Siddi Flamenco company appeared at the Pillow in more-intimate confines than at its new home at the Lensic Performing Arts Center, and the performers were not as cramped as they used to be on the postage-stamp-sized stage at the María Benítez Cabaret Theatre in Santa

Fe. This in-between space offered faces and not always feet, as any performer venturing too far downstage was invisible from the knees down to the front half of the audience. It was also disconcerting that the evening was performed on the rubberized flooring that is perfect for ballet and modern companies, but horrible for tap and flamenco. A wooden floor would have allowed the rapid-fire strike of the dancers' shoes to sing out properly.

With 14 performers on the stage, the economic advantage of Siddi's new relationship with ASFB was hard to miss. It cost a lot to take that number of dancers on the road. Beyond that, the lighting, sound design, number of costumes, and even transitions and "choreography" for the singers have clearly been influenced for the better by the group's association with a well-oiled, touring ballet company.

Siddi himself may have felt he had something to prove, after a harsh review in *The New York Times* during the group's spring engagement at the Joyce Theater in New York. Siddi appeared throughout the program at the Pillow, seeming to reclaim turf. *Segiriya* was daring and strong. Carola Zertuche, Siddi's regular guest artist, was on fire. Her solo was a glimpse of the kind of old-fashioned passion and intensity that recalled the artistry of María Benítez.

http://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/performance/dance/country-dancing-asfb-juan-siddi-at-jacob-s-pillow-dance/article_f5a6e05f-b5b0-541c-b36a-4e8a57c0a648.html