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Worlds collide in dramatic program from Mateo

By Thea Singer

CAMBRIDGE — José Mateo’s new program, “Light to Dark,” sends worlds crashing into one another: musical worlds, emotional worlds, physical worlds. In this final program in the 30th anniversary season of José Mateo Ballet Theatre, the choreographer plunges deep into the ravages of the human psyche with a premiere that, at points, makes your hair stand on end.

Mateo leads you there with two older works: The first, “Back to Bach” (2002), set to Bach’s exuberant Piano Concerto in G minor, invites you in. The second, “Dark Profiles” (2001), to Beethoven’s dissonant Gross Fuge in B flat, prepares you for the fall. It’s a wise kind of programming: You stick close as events unfold even when the action seems a bit contrived or the remarkable scores overwhelm the choreography.

True to Mateo’s aesthetic, the premiere, “The Even and the Odd,” springs directly from the music, here Anna Clyne’s riveting “Night Ferry” (2012). In it, eerie clangs and gunshot bursts, swirling eddies and military locksteps ravage imagined utopias.

A dance for two couples and a corps of 12, the piece plays against betrayal, naïveté against manipulation, hope against cynicism. None of them win out. Yet a tenderness emerges via flitting leitmotifs: A taut Angie DeWolff, in red, pushes into a slight sideways lunge, her arms stretching high. She’s etching a diagonal line toward space, a beam of light in a barren landscape. She and her partner, Spencer Doru Keith, a marvel of nuanced gestures, engage in quiet, quiet waltzes amid the hard-edged arabesques, quick passé spins, and rigorous crisscrossing lines of thongs of dancers.

There’s a power play here between DeWolff and the lithe Lauren Ganther, who’s in black and partnered by the generous Stephen James. Perhaps it’s a battle between female titans. We don’t know, and that’s OK. Part of the wonder of dance is that it’s open to many interpretations, and its architecture and kinesthetic kick can be enough; we don’t need a narrative line. But “The Even and the Odd” is high drama with fierce psychological drivers. It needs palpable reasons throughout for why A must follow B. Eventually it loses that steam of necessity, continuing, it seems, in order to fill out the 20-minute score.

“Back to Bach,” on the other hand, is a buoyant celebration of structure and form. It’s a dance for 15 with the pellicid partnering of Magdalena Gyftopoulos and Keith at its core. Filled with Mateo’s intricate geometric patterning and rapid permutations of groups, solos, and couples, the dance commingles airborne classical lines with grounded, contemporary quirks. Quick ballet beats and pas de chats give way to unbridled hops and flexed feet as the dancers embody the music.

“Dark Profiles” forms a bridge between those two pieces. It’s strikingly articulate, but exhibits some of the same dramatic excess as the premiere. Madeleine Bonn is regal and cool as the isolated lead female figure against a corps of 12. She moves with grace yet has a spine of stone. Her feet now dart like ice picks, now step deliberately, as if navigating the jagged chords of the Beethoven score. Her arms push sideways, fingers splayed: She’s opening a passageway, perhaps to healing.

At certain points, a group of watchers in long black dresses forms a backdrop to the central action, like a mythic chorus. It’s a heady image, recalling early Martha Graham. The emotional timbre resonates, but the logic of the watchers’ presence remains obscure.

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