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Ballett Frankfurt will be missed

Stephanie von Buchau, CONTRIBUTOR

AMERICAN-BORN choreographer William Forsythe was told two years ago that Ballett Frankfurt, the company he had founded 20 years ago and raised to international prominence, would no longer be fully funded by the North German city of Frankfurt.

There was also a suggestion that, in these conservative, cash-strapped times, Forsythe's edgy, avant-garde choreography and dancers were not quite what the tutu-minded German burghers preferred.

The contretemps has been settled. Forsythe will run his own company out of Frankfurt and Dresden with local and state governments providing some funding.

Two performances sponsored by Cal Performances, were our final chance to see the original Ballett Frankfurt.

From the screaming ovation that followed each of the four works premiered Thursday night at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, the company and its iconoclastic choreographer will be missed.

Forsythe, who made a pair of stunning "ballet ballets" (his terminology) for the San Francisco Ballet under Helgi Tomasson, is that contradictory artist -- a classically trained, deeply intellectual, theoretical choreographer who wants his audience to forget all that and experience his work viscerally.

"Visceral" is a terrific term for Forsythe's high-energy, off-center, muscular dance steps. He often starts with a painfully intellectual concept, but what you see on stage has little to do with that formal underpinning.

For instance, the evening closes with "One Flat Thing, reproduced" (2000), a dance supposedly inspired by the failed expedition of Scott of Antarctica.

Fourteen dancers wearing shorts, trousers, T-shirts and tanks tops, rush forward carrying 20 metal tables that they smash to the ground with great noise and upheaval.

Thom Willems, Forsythe's resident composer, produces pounding electronic backgrounds as the dancers hurl themselves on, over and under the tables, working at breakneck speed and cueing each other's movements. It's exhilarating, thrilling and scary if you contemplate the bumps and bruises that must have occurred during rehearsals.

"The Room As It Was" (2002) opens the program in silence, slowly developing its "sound score" from squeaking, resined toe shoes, heavy breathing, yelps and grunts, even what sounds alarmingly like popping cartilage.

At the very end, Willems provides an organ solo as the backdrop raises to lighten the piece.

"Duo" (1996) is supposed to be about time and clocks, but really it is two women in black shorts and see-through mesh tops who dance, mostly in unison, to a distant, tinkling score. At times they seem like lovers, at others like a sisterhood of adepts to something we'll never understand.

In this piece came the evening's single most memorable moment, for me at least. Jill Johnson, a tall redhead, stands downstage and performs a slow developpe, the working leg unfolding in an arc of simple beauty. Then she holds it without a wobble.

2002's (N.N.N.N.) is for four guys, banging each other on the head and getting caught in humorous cat's cradles that mimic the four cygnets in "Swan Lake." There is typical casual male violence in this piece, but nothing lethal.

Because he basically subverts traditional balletic movement, Forsythe's works are extremely difficult to dance. Neither his men nor women have the godlike qualities of typical ballet dancers. They seem more like ordinary people with extraordinary physical and mental abilities, deserving every one of those roars of approval.

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