

Landgraf on Dance

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Storytellers

"Drei Streifen:Tanz", **Choreographies by Benjamin Millepied, Demis Volpi and Jiří Bubeníček**
Ballet Dortmund
Opernhaus Dortmund
Dortmund, Germany
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by Ilona Landgraf

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“Drei Streifen: Tanz”, Ballet Dortmund's new triple bill, allows insight into the work of three different choreographers. The pas de deux “Closer” offers a glance into Benjamin Millepied's artistic work. Stuttgart Ballet's resident choreographer Demis Volpi presents himself with three short duos. The evening's second half was reserved for Jiří Bubeníček's new creation “The Piano”.
“The Piano” is based on the movie of the same name by the New Zealand film director Jane Campion and has been awarded with – amongst others - the Golden Palm in Cannes in 1993 and an Oscar in 1994. Set in mid-19th century it is about a Scotswoman Ada McGrath, who, for whatever reason, has been mute since her sixth year of age. She expresses her inner life mainly through playing the piano. When Ada and her daughter Flora are forced into a marriage with the Britishman Alistair Stewart, a plantation owner living in New Zealand, the piano is the most important part of the luggage. The to-be-wed couple, however, has never met before. Alistair, at first disenchanted by his future wife's appearance, doesn't understand the piano's importance. Seeming to be an unpractical object, it is left at the beach where Ada and Flora had come ashore.

Ada, however, doesn't get along with Alistair. She denies his advances and secludes herself away from everyone except her daughter. George Baines, an acquaintance of Alistair, later saves the piano from wind and weather. He is fascinated by Ada's playing the piano, actually more by Ada herself, and pretends to desire taking piano lessons with her. At first indignant, Ada is all the more shocked when George makes an immoral offer: If she allows his approaches she will reacquire her piano, key by key. Ada agrees unwillingly. Though slowly but surely enjoying George's caresses she vacillates between being a faithful wife or giving free rein to her growing desire for George. Only when George decides to freely give back the piano and not make her into a whore, do Ada's emotions break through. They make love but are secretly observed by Alistair. Mortified, hurt and enraged, Alistair shuts Ada up at home. Shortly thereafter, catching her trying to send George a message, he goes mad with anger and chops off one of her fingers. Then, though caring for his delirious wife, Alistair justifies his deed, even as he is about to rape her, though in fact he is desperately yearning to be loved by her. But at this very moment he believes he hears Ada's voice (her voice was only in his head, though she in fact said no word). Trying to master the situation, Alistair pulls a gun on George, but ultimately allows Ada and Flora to leave for Southern New Zealand with the other man. In the movie Ada gives orders to throw the piano over board during the passage. More or less deliberately, she lets her foot get entangled in the rope which had tied down the piano. She is pulled into the sea, flirting with the idea of drowning in the silence of the deep. At the last moment she frees herself and re-emerges from the waters. As if healed by the trauma she starts to speak again.



Jiří Bubeníček cut and condensed the plot but – except for the end - generally followed the movie. His finale refers to the book “The Piano” which was published one year after the film had been released. While on the passage to Southern New Zealand Ada simply leaves the boat. It remains open as to what happens to her. Knowing the film I was disappointed that, by this, he withheld from Ada a core step in her personal development, the decision to literally strip off the chains which had been put on her but which she had also attached by herself. In the movie Ada had the courage to eke out expressiveness again - not as before by solely playing music but by also speaking - to regain vitality, the joy of living. Having her merely walk away from the boat devalues and betrays George's love and makes her surrender to being alone.

However, except for the final twenty seconds, the earlier seventy-five minutes are ravishing. Albeit I'm a sissy when it comes to bloody butchery but Otto Bubeníček's gorgeous video montages of New Zealand's landscape – waterfalls, ferns, forests, the imposing surf, accompanied by the sounds of nature - make up for everything. The music ranges from Michael Nyman's original film music to that of Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Schnittke, Debussy and others.

I especially liked the first scene when Ada and Flora land on New Zealand's shore. The two-part cinema screen displaying the powerful surf slides apart and reveals the little boat heavily loaded with luggage and the piano. Mother and daughter look grimly out from under their hats, facing whatever uncertainties might come.

On a tour to New Zealand the Bubeníček brothers explored in depth the country's nature and culture. They not only absorbed



the beauty and natural force of the two islands but also became acquainted with the singing and dancing of the Maori. The latter is aptly brought to life by Dortmund Ballet's corps de ballet. The costumes, evoking the fashion of the period, are by Elsa Pavanel; set, video and sound design are by Otto Bubeníček. Pleasantly flowing from one scene to the next, his videos allowed a swift narrative style without creating havoc. While a background with an ornamental patterned wallpaper characterizes Alistair's home – symbolizing a place for small-mind-

ed people where things are trim and orderly, guarded by trees in front of the door that are black, skeleton-like trunks – the places Ada meets George are surrounded by pristine nature. Oversimplification in terms of seeing things only in black and white never occurs though.

Jiří Bubeníček, expertly playing with the tempo, takes the time to unfold the relationship between Ada and Alistair and especially between Ada and George while accelerating it on other occasions, thus maintaining an arc of suspense throughout. He also includes a side plot, a theater performance at the mission station which I at first thought dispensable. But I changed my mind. This interlude provides an opportunity to highlight the cultural trenches between the bigoted society, the colonizing British, and the indigenous people. It also allows introducing the slimly winsome Reverend Campbell - actually a philanderer - and children dancing as carol singers. Moreover the motif of the cleaver is picked up in the theater performance. (A scene from the tale of Bluebeard when he is about to behead his wife is given as a shadow pantomime.) Miming is also used on a few other occasions to convey details of the plot, such as George offering to let Ada have the piano back when she's willing to be touched – a stunningly simple, straight scene! Frowned upon as old-fashioned today, miming being almost a red rag for other choreographers, Bubeníček seems relaxed with this tool of his trade.



The individuality of each leading role is characterized by a distinctive style of movement. Ada (the poignant Emilie Nguyen) is withdrawn like an oyster but longs for affection beneath her shell. Only when playing piano does she let herself go. Though small and looking fragile, she firmly defends herself and her inner world. Completely shocked after her finger has been chopped off she stands shakily, for the moment her spirit seems to have left her body. What must it mean to a piano player, to an artist in general, when the way of expression gets mutilated!

For the role of George Baines, Arsen Mehrabyan, Principal of the Royal Swedish Ballet, headed to Dortmund. Able to express the tiniest emotional nuances in a touching, natural way he hovers between suppressed desire, tender approach, passion, desperation and - bringing himself up short - manly conduct. Well done!

Dmitry Semionov danced Alistair. Tall and with lanky limbs one could immediately see that he isn't the right man for Ada. Spruce, his awkwardness towards women hiding behind a facade of propriety, he chops wood in what looks like his Sunday best. His initial rage when discovering that Ada is betraying him lacks internal strength. However the closer he comes to the chopping block, the more his fury grows.

The young girl Casey Hoskins, as Flora, has quite an impact on the course of events, radiating self-assurance. Arsen Azatyan scampers around as perky Reverend Campbell, a well-crafted portrait of an eager and self-complacent clerical shepherd. Closest to him in his flock are Aunt Morag (Jelena-Ana Stupar) and Nessie (Sayo Yoshida), two dried up spinsters whose affected manners make every potential husband take to his heels.

I remember an interview in which Otto Bubeníček once said: "We are Czechs. We love to tell stories." Regardless of their nationality's influence, one thing is certain: Both are talented storytellers. Every minute of "The Piano" makes one feel how much heartfelt blood they put into it.

Compared to the Bubeníčeks' visually stunning, emotionally dense romantic drama, it is difficult for Volpi's and Millepied's works to leave behind an impression. Volpi's three pas de deux - "Little Monsters" (2011), "Private Light" (2011) and the new "Ebony Concerto" all revolve around partner relationships. In "Little Monsters", accompanied by Elvis Presley's schmaltzy songs, Moonsun Yoon's and Hiroaki Ishida's clinging, manipulative love affair ends in separation followed by loneliness. In "Private Light" Andrei Morariu is able to throw the combative, arrogant Clara Sorzano off course with a single kiss. In "Ebony Concerto" (music by Stravinsky) Amanda Vieira and Davide D'Elia have much fun first, then at one point Vieira starts to scream - a bit too shrill and too long - until she is exhausted, slouching her shoulders. In Ebony Concerto's second half the atmosphere becomes melancholic but the two dancers end on a humorous note: D'Elia, looking up from below at Vieira's face, blows under her tousled hair which hangs like a curtain in front of her face, making her smile again.

The pieces are similar in style, which is also emphasized through Katharina Schlipf's plain costumes: shorts in different colors plus skin-colored tops. Volpi plays with silhouettes, for example, making one dancer stand behind the other as if being one body with four arms, or, when one is vertically lifted, varying that one's leg movement. But while "Little Monsters" was a hit the topic seems worn thin and repetitive now. Time for a fresh approach!

Millepied's "Closer", a work created for American Ballet Theater in 2006 is, according to the playbill, about the search for being close to each other, about intimacy and the wish to melt together. Noble words aiming high. Danced by Monica Fotescu-Uta and Mark Radjabov it is a nice, abstract work, depicting phases of a couple's relationship. Its twenty minutes come up with few surprises and feel lengthy, an impression underlined by the monotonously pushing chords of Philipp Glass' "Mad Rush" played live on stage by pianist Jie Xu. Real emotions do not arise. "Closer" is a brainchild, enjoyable to watch once or maybe twice but without lasting relevance. Strong narratives, by comparison, will always take the cake.





Photos:

1. Arsen Mehrabyan (George Baines) and Emilie Nguyen (Ada McGrath), "The Piano" by Jiří Bubeníček, Ballet Dortmund 2015
2. Emilie Nguyen (Ada McGrath) and Arsen Mehrabyan (George Baines), "The Piano" by Jiří Bubeníček, Ballet Dortmund 2015
3. Arsen Mehrabyan (George Baines) and Emilie Nguyen (Ada McGrath), "The Piano" by Jiří Bubeníček, Ballet Dortmund 2015
4. Dmitry Semionov (Alistair Stewart) and Emilie Nguyen (Ada McGrath), "The Piano" by Jiří Bubeníček, Ballet Dortmund 2015
5. Casey Hoskins (Flora McGrath), Emilie Nguyen (Ada McGrath), Arsen Mehrabyan (George Baines) and ensemble, "The Piano" by Jiří Bubeníček, Ballet Dortmund 2015
6. Moonsun Yoon and Hiroaki Ishida, "Little Monsters" by Demis Volpi, Ballet Dortmund 2015
7. Clara Sorzano and Andrei Morariu, "Private Light" by Demis Volpi, Ballet Dortmund 2015
8. Amanda Vieira and davide D'Elia, "Ebony Concerto" by Demis Volpi, Ballet Dortmund 2015
9. Mark Radjapov and Monica Fotescu-Uta, "Closer" by Benjamin Millepied, Ballet Dortmund 2015

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