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# San Francisco Ballet unveils two works, but repeats reign

Debating are Jiri Bubenicek's 'Fragile Vessels,' Yuri Possokhov's 'Optimistic Tragedy'



San Francisco Ballet performing Justin Peck's "In the Countenance of Kings." (© Erik Tomasson)

By **ANN MURPHY, CORRESPONDENT** |

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One of Helgi Tomasson's strengths as artistic director at San Francisco Ballet has been his often-canny talent for knitting together disparate works and assembling programs that are often far more interesting than the parts.

But for Program 1, “The Joy of Dance,” which opened the 2017 season Jan. 24, that curatorial know-how skipped town. Tomasson’s dryly academic choreography for “Haffner Symphony” (1991) met Mozart with on-the-beat movement that hammered the grand, pastoral composition into obedience. Even usually impeccable principal Maria Kochetkova looked slightly weary as she whipped around the stage in her solo, her jutting head throwing off her turns and her usually sparkling musicality seeming frayed. The ensemble, too, though dancing masterfully, could not transcend the dutiful purpose that drives “Haffner.”

What followed was the world premiere of “Fragile Vessels” by Czech choreographer Jiri Bubenicek, a ballet for 20 dancers that was as overwrought as “Haffner” was metronomic. Neither ballet was able to support a case for the other.

Bubenicek set his dancers whirring into big unison action — ranging from leaps and arabesque lifts to floor dives as bombastic as the dances that emerged from the Bolshoi Ballet during the Cold War era. Even lovely exchanges between cracker-jack principal Dores André, boyishly elegant Joseph Walsh and dramatic Wei Wang were sandbagged by Bubenicek’s heavy-handed action and clotted staging. The off-base set design — a giant fin or harplike form with 12 spines (designed by Bubenicek’s twin brother, Otto) — ate up the stage space, and the warm, pale environment of sand-colored costumes and elegant pink-sand lighting (Jim French) suggested not so much sensuality as a luminous petri dish where odd life forms were engaged in fevered struggle.

Consequently, when the curtain rose on Justin Peck's "In the Countenance of Kings" it was as though spring had burst on the scene following a tough winter. When this big, wonderfully fluid work premiered last year, it struck me as sophomoric, if enormous fun. In Program 1, its insouciant combination of effortless craft and silky musicality shined amid the dreary company. Walsh and André stole the show with their impeccable and relatable dancing, and while the orchestra performed well all night, it really bit into Sufjan Stevens' lush "The BQE" (Brooklyn Queens Expressway) as if it were zooming down the highway.

At its Jan. 26 opening, the Program 2 lineup was almost as motley. What changed was that all the works, even when they only partly made sense, freed the dancers to be artists, not merely superb technicians carrying heavy loads.

That was true in the reprise of Alexei Ratmanský's wonderfully humane "Seven Sonatas" (2009), and nowhere more evident than in William Forsythe's "Pas/Parts," a repurposed 1999 ballet that was so overhauled it became a 2016 premiere. Yuri Possokhov's latest work, "Optimistic Tragedy," was another of his flawed concept pieces, but it beautifully showcased the stunning male dancers of the company.

Not the least of Possokhov's choreographic flaws are an adolescent and aggressively envious relationship to women, and frequent thematic contradictions that undermine the smooth surfaces he creates. In this work those were evident in the sole female figure of "Optimistic" — the radiant, soon-to-retire Lorena Feijoo — being cast as the "Commissary" on a Russian ship meant to echo the 1905 Potemkin, although her character is pulled from a play and Russian blockbuster film about the 1917 Russian Revolution called "Optimistic Tragedy." She is meant to represent "freedom."

While 1905 marked the beginning of widespread mass uprisings in Russia, it was inedible food that led to a showdown on the battleship Potemkin. Mutineers killed nearly half the ship's officers. In Possokhov's version, an Anarchist (Taras Domitro) rapes "freedom" (Feijoo). Then she kills him, and is swept into the protective arms of the Captain (Luke Ingham). So much for girl power. So much for the people's rebellion.

This melodramatic muddle underscores Possokhov's serious conceptual limitations. If only he would stick to the dancing. The new work's finest scene comes when a collection of sailors performs a ritual dance, part circle of aggression echoing "Boléro" and part Cossack bonding dance. It points to where Possokhov's talents lie. However, it was Feijoo's glorious dancing, Ingham's silken partnering, Alexander V. Nichols' elegant and powerful video triptych of ships, sea foam, sailors and warfare — plus the haunting score by Russian composer Ilya Demutsky — that were the ballet's true heroes.

Few works in the company's repertory so completely leave behind narrative form to focus on the structures and mechanisms of the balletic body as "Pas/Parts," which closed Program 2 with a spellbinding cheekiness that was thrilling. Joseph Walsh, Julia Rowe, Sofiane Sylve, Carlo Di Lanno, Francisco Mungamba, James Sofranko and their peers were witty, edgy and sexier than at any other time in this program. We can attribute that to the sheer power of Forsythe's relentless imagination, and what these masterful and deeply personable artists can make their bodies do.



Joseph Walsh and Julia Rowe in William Forsythe's "Pas/Parts" 2016. (© Erik Tomasson)

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## San Francisco Ballet

Program 1, 'The Joy of Dance' with works by Helgi Tomasson, Jiri Bubenicek and Justin Peck

**Through:** Feb. 4

Program 2, 'Modern Masters' with works by  
Alexei Ratmansky, Yuri Possokhov and William  
Forsythe

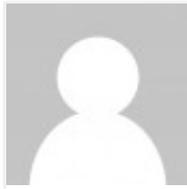
**Through:** Feb. 5

**Tickets:** \$25-\$158; 415-8652000, [www.sfballet.org](http://www.sfballet.org)

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