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DANCE REVIEW

Vail International Dance Festival Celebrates Meter



Erin Baiano/Vail International Dance Festival

Vail International Dance Festival BalletX and guest stars in Matthew Neenan's "Show Me," at the Gerald R. Ford Amphitheater.

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY

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VAIL, Colo. — Every August, the Vail International Dance Festival, high in the Rockies here, presents an impressive collection of world premieres: ballet, modern dance and other genres. While there's no scenery (except the mountains), most performances are accompanied by live music. And most of the dancers and choreographers are well known — often from New York.

On Tuesday night the "NOW: Premieres" program included no fewer than seven new creations: The idioms included flamenco, Memphis jookin, ballet and barefoot modern dance. The program's last and longest piece, [Dance Heginbotham's](#) "Easy Win," was among its happiest hits. The choreographer John Heginbotham, formerly a member of the Mark Morris Dance Group, founded this group in 2011; his combination of stylistic naïveté and structural sophistication — related to Mr. Morris's — can sometimes show eccentricity tipping over into preciosity, but here it's disarming, increasingly so as the dance proceeds.

A crucial ingredient is the music: eight piano pieces by [Ethan Iverson](#), a strong presence, seated centrally at the back of the stage. (At one point, he rises as if about to join in.) These pieces are marvelous studies in meter, with a wit that, though modern and often jazzy, feels temperamentally akin to the minds we sense behind the jauntily experimentalist piano miniatures of composers from Rossini to Virgil Thomson.

Mr. Heginbotham's seven dancers (five women, two men), all barefoot and each strikingly individual, are primarily soloists here, and they're keenly alive to the main pulses of Mr. Iverson's music. Like dancers taking class, they face front until the movement turns them in different directions, and that classroom atmosphere is peculiarly present, though mostly there's no unison. When these people form couples, some are same-sex and others hetero; that's no big deal.

They all move to this music with vigor. As we see up to seven dancers moving separately, it becomes a surprise to notice how often some larger pattern emerges. (This woman moving downstage right is actually mirroring that one upstage right, for example.) One dancer vibrates his hands as if holding down some unseen object; then different hand flutters become a motif around the other dancers.

There's plenty of quirkiness (in the last number, one man just stands and rotates his pelvis, as if moving a hula hoop), but compositional fun and good-humored naturalness are increasingly potent. Like most pieces on this program, "Easy Win" is a dance I'm keen to see again. (It comes to the [Joyce Theater](#) in New York in October.)

No less winning and witty — and more diverse in tone — is Matthew Neenan's "Show Me." This, composed to three folk-related musical items (Padma Newsome's "[Simpson's Gap](#)," Aoife O'Donovan's "[Show Me](#)" and Christina Courtin's "[Tralala](#)," as played live by the quartet Brooklyn Rider), is for the eight dancers of BalletX of Philadelphia and the guest stars Isabella Boylston (American Ballet Theater) and Zachary Catazaro (New York City Ballet). Mr. Neenan makes Ms. Boylston and Mr. Catazaro both look authoritatively beautiful, showing them in new lights; she moves with lyrical rapture, he with a touch of pirouetting virtuosity. (The Vail audience, which loves athleticism, applauded his biggest spin.) Yet theirs are actually the least exceptional parts of this dance.

The material for their eight colleagues is marvelously resourceful. Though Mr. Neenan touches on this format only lightly, he sometimes gives us the old Mark Morris structure of woman-woman, man-man, man-woman and woman-man with great verve. Mainly, he gives us contrasting quartets (three men and a woman, three women and a man), and the dances have suspense, vitality, comedy, freedom.

In "Desire Liar," [Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Riener](#) move rivetingly to the brisk pizzicati of Brooklyn Rider's account of Glenn Kotche's "[Ping Pong Fumble Throw](#)." These are superlative dancers, both as individuals (moving apart but simultaneously) and as a couple. This is the most musically attentive number I have seen them dance, and the often pronounced staccato rhythm they establish as an answer to the music is brilliant.

Elena Heiss's unaccompanied and untitled solo is a happy study in flamenco nuevo, with foot taps supplemented by claps and slaps. In her duet "Migration," [Fang-Yi Sheu](#) not only shows the riveting physicality that makes her a spellbinder but also shares it with her male colleague, Altan Dugaraa of Boston Ballet. (One problem here, though, is that [Olafur Arnalds's taped piano-led music](#) sounds blandly easy-listening.)

The program's diversity was established by its two opening items. In "Dig the Say," the Memphis jookers Lil Buck (Charles Riley) and Prime Tyme (Ron Myles) dance together to unappealing music by Vijay Iyer (Brooklyn Rider again, with the percussionist Greg Saunier). These two performers are rare virtuosos, but too much of their movement is just that — look-what-I-can-do show-off stuff. It's striking how theatrically assured these two have become, but rhythmic vitality is seldom at the forefront of "Dig the Say."

Pam Tanowitz's "Day for Night for Vail" is an oddball trio for ballet dancers (Joseph Gordon and Gretchen Smith from City Ballet, Calvin Royal III from Ballet Theater). Set to Mr. Saunier's tensely modernist music but often moving through silence and establishing independent rhythms, it came as near as anything to losing the sympathy of Tuesday's friendly Vail audience.

Yet it holds attention, and this is because Ms. Tanowitz's peculiarly inventive humor (marvelous footwork, as so often with her) maintains a what-will-happen-next quality that keeps everyone on happy tenterhooks. And Mr. Gordon, until now a golden adolescent, looks here commandingly adult.

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