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### Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

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Eclectic Entertainment: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet brings old and new works to 2009 ADF

Energy, invention, popularity, eclecticism, and precision - these are the ideals on which Aspen Santa Fe Ballet is founded, according to Executive Director Jean-Philippe Malaty. All of these elements were indeed present in the company's performance at the Durham Performing Arts Center (July 2-4), an evening designed to bring together the worlds of ballet and modern dance. The concert featured four works from the company's wide-ranging repertoire.

Twyla Tharp's 1975 work, "Sue's Leg," led off the program, and featured four dancers - two women, two men - dressed in an assortment of sweatshirts, loose pants, and sweater vests in white, gold, and orange. Set to popular songs by Thomas "Fats" Waller, "Sue's Leg" incorporates social dance moves and gestures from the 1930's into Tharp's idiosyncratic style, resulting in a loosey-goosey romp, full of slides, quick, silly jumps, and pelvises with minds of their own. Originally created for four distinct personalities - including Tharp herself - reconstructing this work seemed to be a challenge for Aspen Santa Fe dancers. Their energy - although much higher by the end of the dance - seemed not quite rambunctious enough to fill the large stage, and the gestures, while clearly accurate, appeared more studied than natural. What a task, though, to capture Tharp's particular brand of nonchalant virtuosity! Though the soloist dancing Tharp's original role never missed a quirky shoulder twitch, head roll, or a wiggle of the leg, she seemed something of a pale ghost of Tharp, neither performer's personality completely present.

William Forsythe's striking duet, "Slingerland" (2000), featured Sam Chittenden and Katherine Eberle in light-colored body suits, with a flattened, wavy tutu for Eberle. Lit only from the sides, the dancers' faces were shadowed, but their bodies glowed, cutting a reverse silhouette into the blackness around them. Connected with a firm and nearly constant grip, the two dipped and fell, their sharp lines sliding into other shapes, some crooked and off-balance, some smooth and seductive. Forsythe reconsidered the traditional pas de deux of classical ballet, foregrounding the very real and strong support needed in this relationship, surprising us by bringing the male through different levels (he sometimes crouched low, close to the floor). Through the unconventional lighting, he shadowed rather than highlighted the pair, giving us a feeling of watching an intimate moment in a complex relationship.

"Night," originally commissioned by the Joffrey Ballet in 1980, featured post-modern choreographer Laura Dean's rhythmic and geometric patterns. Accompanied by a relentlessly repetitive and cacophonous piano work, also by Dean, the eight dancers spun (en pointe, for the women!) endlessly, wove back and forth and through each other, creating layers of limbs, reaching, kicking, melting, growing. Following complicated and specific spatial patterns, the dancers joined in one by one to a series of subtly changing phrases. The hypnotic effect of these patterns and rhythms produced a physiological effect in the viewer, rather than an intellectual one. As one phrase developed into another, there was a momentary chaos until the pattern settled into its recognizable order; we felt a familiar tension and release, as in the resolution of a dissonant chord.

The program concluded with "Red Sweet," by Jorma Elo, resident choreographer for the Boston

Ballet. Elo's work proved to be the most entertaining of the evening, and showcased the company's talents well. Set to Vivaldi and Biber, "Red Sweet" was flashy, with magenta lights and dark red "Wonderwoman"-style leotards for the women. The movement was characterized by sharp arm and head gestures, with the hands carrying particular focus. With quick freezes, wrist flicks, and gestures borrowed from hip-hop and rave dancing, the hands had power to redirect the dancers' gazes, and change the direction of movement impulses and body parts; when they matched the vibrato or phrasing of the movement, the hands seemed almost to be controlling the music, rather than the other way around. Although the quirkiness of the movement was fun to watch, and the dancers certainly reveled in it, the work was a little long, and the gestures lost some of their novelty by the end.

The strength of these dancers is clearly in contemporary ballet, where they perform with precision, confidence, and personality. In the modern dance works on this program, their versatility was inconsistent, despite their earnest attempts.

The American Dance Festival continues through July. Up next are ADF Faculty (July 6-7) and ADF Musicians (July 8), followed by Pilobolus (July 9-11), featuring two new works commissioned by ADF, "Redline" and "2b."

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