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Ballet troupe stretches, twists tradition

BY ROY C. DICKS, Correspondent

DURHAM - The Aspen Santa Fe Ballet made an impressive return to the American Dance Festival on Thursday, following its dazzling debut here last year, adding luster to its already shining reputation.

ADF's theme of "Where Ballet and Modern Meet" is fully realized with four pieces built around traditional ballet language and technique, but cleverly disguised or boldly co-opted.

Twyla Tharp's 1975 "Sue's Leg," with music by Fats Waller, takes balletic moves and hides them under vaudeville, tap and swing. Its limber, loose casualness belies the precision needed to sustain it. The four performers danced wittily, capped by Emily Proctor's two bravura sections, but did not seem relaxed or fully involved enough to give this rarely seen piece its full due.

Any lingering doubts were put to rest with the remainder of the program. Sam Chittenden and Katherine Eberle wowed with their perfection in William Forsythe's "Slingerland." The seven-minute pas de deux from 2000 at first seems straight out of 19th-century ballet, but it's soon apparent this is some alternate, alien version of ballet, aided by Gavin Bryars' eerie score.

The two are in skin-toned tights (Eberle with a space-age tutu) that glow against murky shadows. With an odd extension here and a strange lift there, their manner creates a gripping, otherworldly mood.

Laura Dean's 1980 "Night" has all that choreographer's signatures -- her own minimalist score, repetitive phrases, and, of course, the spinning. This 25-minute work must be given into utterly or else it will drive you from the auditorium. If you let the eight dancers in martial arts-like garb lull you into a mesmerized state, you can then concentrate on the small, entropic variations of the repetitions.

The spinning here takes on an unusual aspect, the four women in toe shoes making the turns more angled and pointillist. As with all Dean works, you'll wonder how the dancers can do so much turning without flying off into the wings.

"Red Sweet" is the stunning year-old commission from hot new choreographer Jorma Elo. Set to Vivaldi and Biber, the piece for four couples is a showy display of verve, wit and energy. Jordan Tuinman's color-soaked lighting sets up an odd world inhabited by something other than humans.

Each couple participates in little rituals with strange hand signals, neck thrusts and toe wiggles before they fully engage, bringing to mind insect mating courtships.

There are no toe shoes but the women use pointe technique to bounce, slide and skid with the help of their male partners.

There's a lot of humor, much of which comes from clever exits from each section. It's a tribute to the dancers and choreographer that you want to see the work again immediately to see what you missed.

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What: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, American Dance Festival

Where: Durham Performing Arts Center

When: 8 p.m. today and Saturday

Cost: \$22-\$43

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