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Fall for Dance

City Center

New York, New York

September 26, 28, October 1, 2016

Program 1: *AIRSLICE* (Streb Extreme Action), *Spring* (Dada Masilo/The Dance Factory), *Monotones II* (American Ballet Theatre), *Mi Soledad* (Solea) (Farruquito)

Program 2: *Rejoice in the Lamb* (Richard Alston Dance Company), *Awaa* (Aszure Barton & Artists), *The Ballad of Mack and Ginny* (Wendy Whelan and Edward Watson), *Suite Branca* (Grupo Corpo)

Program 3: *Opus 14* (CCN de La Rochelle/CIE Accrorap), *While I Have the Floor* (Ayodele Casel), *Shape of Glow* (Hong Kong Ballet), *Spirit* (Bangarra Dance Theatre)

Jerry Hochman

Fall for Dance, City Center's annual blast of fresh dance air following hard upon New York City's summer doldrums, has always been an opportunity for discovery – as well for securing cheap tickets to see some quality dance. Nowhere was the opportunity for discovery more evident than in the first week of this year's FFD programs.

Much of the dance world is compartmentalized – what may appeal to one dance audience may not appeal to, or be seen by, another. FFD attempts to remedy this by presenting eclectic programming designed to expose viewers to dance they might not otherwise see. If a particular component of a program does not seem as "good" as one hopes or expects, that's as much a product of lack of familiarity as quality. One doesn't need to like everything – just to open one's eyes.



(<http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.2.Grupo-Corpo.Suite-Branca.Jose-Luiz-Pederneiras.-e1476033356887.jpg>)

Grupo Corpo dancers
in Cassi Abranches's "Suite Branca"
Photo Jose Luiz Pederneiras

That being said, being judgmental isn't a bad thing – everyone has visceral likes and dislikes. I tend to be more accepting of the unfamiliar – but for some of the dances on these programs, although my eyes were wide open, at times I wished they'd been wide shut.

I'll discuss each of the dances as presented, seriatim. But for me the hits of the series, so far, were the closing pieces of each program: Farruquito, Grupo Corpo, and because of its distinctiveness, Bangarra Dance Theater.

Program 1

A glaring example of wishing my eyes had been wide shut is the piece that opened the FFD season series, which, at most, brought into question what dance is. [But I must add at this point, perhaps evidencing the "compartmentalization" I mentioned, is that the FFD audience was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Chacun à son goût.]

I had heard a great deal of positive things about Streb Extreme Action, but this was my first opportunity to see them. They performed the world premiere of a FFD commissioned piece, titled *AIRSLICE*. According to the program notes, Artistic Director Elizabeth Streb "revisits equipment structures used in her previous work in order to reimagine the possibilities of her 'action-hero' dancers and their relationship to architecture." That's a mouthful, which I took to mean that *AIRSLICE* didn't include anything particularly new.

As the audience ambles into the theater, the Streb dancers are warming up in front of piles of mattresses and boards, behind which is a structure that looks like an erector set contraption I built when I was a kid, on steroids. Essentially, it's an elevated slotted platform that rotates around a fulcrum, surrounded (at least in the front) by mattresses on boards (or boards on mattresses, or mattresses on mattresses).

When the lights dimmed, a "master of ceremonies" of sorts (a better term might be "ringmaster") screamed at the audience that they were welcome to take as many photos of the performance as they wanted, and to respond verbally as much as they wanted to what they saw. They did. It was like being at a sporting event. And considering that the piece is more athleticism than artistry, this was perfectly appropriate.

AIRSLICE is divided into two parts. In the first, four members of the company perform on the largest of the mattress/board combinations, jumping up and falling down, hard – most of the time against the mattresses, but sometimes against each other. Although there is a commendable sequence in which the four leap over each other, horizontally, before crashing onto the mattress, the object apparently is to body-slam against the mattress and each other as hard as possible, to make the loudest noise possible doing so, and to appear in the process to take an impossible physical beating and pop right back up again. Maybe that's the current definition of an action-hero. Each time a body hit the mattress, the audience responded with cheers (commingled with shouts of "Go Jackie...").



(http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.1.FFD__BER2496-e1476034609442.jpg)

STREB Extreme Action in "AIRSLICE"
Photo Stephanie Berger



(http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.1.FFD__BER2634-e1476034514795.jpg)

STREB Extreme Action in "AIRSLICE"
Photo Stephanie Berger

In the second part, the four are joined by the company's five other performers, and they hoist themselves onto the erector-set structure. The slotted platform rotates; they stand, sit, and shift balance so the platform continues to move (when someone isn't propelling it by hand), hang off it, and fall off it. Cool.

Granted that *AIRSLICE* may require considerable skill to avoid breaking bones or falling off the moving platform prematurely, but to me that's all there is to this. It's sort of circus (though decidedly not on the order of Cirque du Soleil), and sort of pro wrestling, but that would not be fair to either form of entertainment. It's mostly just graceless and loud – something that obviously has considerable appeal to many. But I did observe one point in which a group of performers tossed a woman into the air, horizontally, and she rotated multiple times before gravity pulled her down, demonstrating, in this one brief moment, considerable skill and artistry. So perhaps *AIRSLICE* is simply a poor example of Streb Extreme Action.

In contrast to the brute force of *AIRSLICE*, the second piece on the program was audacious, inventive, and intelligently conceived. Though it wasn't fully realized, this may have been a consequence of the choreographic ingredients used, and perhaps somewhat inevitable, but it's a magnificent conception.

Dada Masilo is one of South Africa's brightest dance lights. Trained in both classical ballet and contemporary dance, she's made her reputation in large part by fusing these art forms with African dance. [She and her dancers are scheduled to appear at the Joyce Theater in February 2017 with her version of *Swan Lake*.] For FFD, Masilo presented the world premiere of *Spring* – her reinterpretation of *The Rite of Spring*.

Applying African dance to Stravinsky's iconic score is an interesting idea, but also one fraught with peril – Nijinsky's original has been depicted in various incarnations as an example of primitive, perhaps savage, human sacrifice, and applying African dance to the score might be seen as taking the primitive and savage from stylization to presumed reality and inviting unwarranted inferences in the process. That's not where Masilo is going with this at all. Her intent is more straightforward, albeit somewhat strange-sounding. According to the program notes, *Spring* "explores the practice of human sacrifice in all its violence and beauty." Violence? Sure. Beauty? I've can't recall seeing human sacrifice depicted as beautiful.

But to an extent, Masilo succeeds in depicting both – though she's considerably more successful showing the beauty in the ritual than the violence. She accomplishes this by bracketing part of the Stravinsky score (used through most of the piece) with music by Max Richter (an excerpt from *Recomposed by Max Richter: Vivaldi – The Four Seasons* – I believe the first, "O", track of "Spring") and Arvo Pärt's *Fur Alina*. The result is not just the violence of Stravinsky, but the beauty of the Richter and the Part. In the end, the dance misses the mark, but it's an intriguing concept.

The piece opens to a starry night sky (lighting by Suzette Le Sueur), with the five Dance Factory dancers (including Masilo) kneeling in shadow in a downstage horizontal line. It's a beautiful image – intentionally evoking the peace and the hope of the return of light in early spring. From there it segues into the Stravinsky – but here, in the heart of the piece, is the choreography's weak point. I concede that I'm not fluent in African dance, and it may be that



(http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.1.FFD__BER2707-e1476034414193.jpg)

Dada Masilo/The Dance Factory in Dada Masilo's "Spring"
Photo Stephanie Berger

Masilo's choreography accurately depicts the essence of African dance (assuming *arguendo* that there's only one dominant form of it). But from my point of view it looked too repetitious, with a seemingly endless series of stomping feet and raving arms. Granted that this is descriptive of many choreographic visualizations of the score – but Masilo's piece had no sense of ritual to accompany the primitivism.

The piece's other weak point is that there's no indication of the Chosen One being selected. All of a sudden, she just *is* the sacrifice. We know that she is because suddenly, amid a scrum of bodies, Masilo emerges in anguished purity, naked as the proverbial jaybird. Without any indication of an actual "sacrifice", she's lifted aloft to the uplifting Part music, reimagining (and perhaps bringing to fruition) the seasonal peace perceived in the opening segment. The images evoke the closing "apotheosis" image in Balanchine's *Serenade* – equally beautiful, though considerably more unexpected.



(http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.1.FFD__BER2856-e1476034130231.jpg)

Cory Sterns, Veronica Part, and Thomas Forster of American Ballet Theatre in Sir Frederick Ashton's "Monotones II"
Photo Stephanie Berger

Following intermission, American Ballet Theatre presented Sir Frederick Ashton's *Monotones II*. I've discussed this piece at length previously – suffice it to say that although the dance was well received by the audience, it looked like a fish out of water in the context of the rest of the evening. Of greater concern was that the three dancers (Veronika Part, Thomas Forster, and Cory Stearns) appeared to be struggling. In a piece in which precision is everything, there were relatively minor, but noticeable, examples of tentative footing and uncertain partnering. I thought, perhaps, that there was some lack of familiarity with the stage floor that affected the performance, which might have been remedied the second night, since these dancers executed better last spring at the Met.



(http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.1.FFD__BER3165-e1476037130658.jpg)

Farruquito,
with musicians and vocalists
in "Mi Soledad (Solea)"
Photo Stephanie Berger

The evening concluded with a smashing exhibition by flamenco star Farruquito (Juan Manuel Fernandez Montoya) in the New York premiere of his *Mi Soledad (Solea)*. The piece supposedly reflects Farruquito's encounter with his flamenco ancestors, but to those without sufficient flamenco knowledge, the presentation worked simply as a compendium of flamenco dances that displayed increasing complexity and intensity as the dance progressed. I tend to dislike testosterone-drenched presentations, but Farruquito's dancing (abetted by the music and vocals provided, live, by Encarna Anillo, Antonio Villar, Mary Vizarraga, and Roman Vicenti) was spectacular, with the blazing feet, precision, and posture of the finest flamenco to be seen anywhere.

Program 2

The Fall for Dance choreographic mixed bag continued with the second program.

Richard Alston is a well-respected London-based choreographer, whose work has been presented many times previously in the New York area. The pieces of his that I've seen are little gems, with a clear focus devoid of extraneous distractions. However, the opening piece of FFD's second program, the New York premiere of his *Rejoice in the Lamb*, while it reaffirmed my appreciation of his choreographic skill and the talent of the engaging dancers in the Richard Alston Dance Company, it otherwise left me cold.

The dance is choreographed to Benjamin Britten's composition of the same title, sung live at the performance by the Montclair State University Vocal Accord (Alston and his company have frequently appeared at the Montclair State University Peak Performances series, and is scheduled to return there in February). The composition relates the story of Christopher Smart, confined to an asylum because of his religious zealotry, who sees God's grace in every living being, including his cat, and convinces his fellow asylum inmates to join his adoration of all God's creatures.



(<http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.2.Rejoice-in-the-Lamb-13-Marianna-Krempeniou-Liam-Riddick-Oihana-Vesga-Bujan-Nancy-Nerantzi-and-Elly-B-e1476029200816.jpg>)

Marianna Krempeniou, Liam Riddick, Oihana Vesga Bujan,
Nancy Nerantzi and Elly Braund
of Richard Alston Dance Company
in "Rejoice in the Lamb"
Photo courtesy New York City Center

There's nothing choreographically wrong with the piece – on the contrary, it's beautifully crafted. Smart's fervor (Smart is portrayed with appropriate benevolent ferocity by Nicholas Bodych), the inmates' skepticism and conversion, and even Smart's cat's underwhelmed curiosity, are all there. But the constant motion, though not unpleasant, doesn't go anywhere dramatically. Like Smart's zealotry, it just is.

In earlier years, FFD presented many excerpted pieces, presumably to provide the audience with as many samples of a particular company or style as it could squeeze into a program. I disliked that format intensely, because I always felt cheated seeing less than what the choreographer originally intended. I feel the same after seeing Aszure Barton's *Awaa*, which was adapted for FFD from an evening length work that premiered in 2012.



(http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.2.Aszure-Barton-Artists_Awaa_by-Don-Lee-1-e1476033484374.jpg)

Dancers of Aszure Barton & Artists in "Awaa"
Photo Don Lee

Awaa translates to “one who is a mother” from the language of the Haida, indigenous people living on the west coast of Canada (as well as parts of Alaska). Whether the dance is based on a Haida legend or is Barton’s extrapolation or invention is not indicated.

Sequences in the adaptation are both gorgeous and compelling – particularly the opening and closing images, including the minimal but stunning sets and lighting by Burke Brown. Parts also pander and seem out of place to me, although the choreography as a whole, and the execution by Barton’s seven dancers, is intriguing and exciting to watch. For example, although there’s plenty of vivid action, even when the dancers are essentially posing – legs planted, but bending forward and back in unison, one senses the gradual but inevitable passage of time. But the adaptation takes bits and pieces of the whole, some seemingly more complete than others, resulting in an incomplete sense of the piece. From what I saw, *Awaa* is a heartfelt (and from my reading, somewhat romanticized) representation of Haida culture and mythology. I look forward to seeing it, and Aszure Barton & Artists, in a more complete context in the future.

For shock and awe, nothing in the FFD programming this year surpasses the U.S. premiere of Arthur Pita’s *The Ballad of Mack and Ginny*, danced by former New York City Ballet principal Wendy Whelan and Royal Ballet principal Edward Watson. [The piece premiered in London in July, 2015.] The dance is based on Kurt Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera*, and relates the “expanded” story of the violent, doomed love affair between Mack the Knife and Ginny Jenny. The music Pita uses is the *Tango Ballad* from Weill’s original score. I suspect that many disliked it: it’s essentially a pas de deux that’s more, and less, than a tango (and like nothing one sees on *Dancing With the Stars*), it’s artistically violent and sexual (but that’s the story), and Whelan spends a good part of the dance without a top (there’s a lot of that kind of exposure going around these days) – albeit with her back to the audience. I didn’t. I enjoyed it even before it began, as an ancient, scratchy version of *Mack the Knife*, the song from the original, was broadcast while the audience was returning to their seats following intermission – and although not identified in the program, I suspect the vocalist was Lotte Lenya, who starred as Ginny Jenny in the 1928 original and was Weill’s wife.



(<http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.2.Wendy-Whelan-and-Edward-Watson.The-Ballad-of-Mack-and-Ginny.by-Andrej-Uspenski.-e1476032716700.jpg>)

Wendy Whelan and Edward Watson
in Arthur Pita’s “The Ballad of Mack and Ginny”
Photo Andrej Uspenski

The Ballad of Mack and Ginny does what it’s supposed to do – it tells the story in an interesting and unusual way, and the performances by Whelan and Watson are spot on in every respect. Sure the portrayals are overbaked, but that’s the way it’s supposed to be. And sure it’s not a “real” tango, but that’s not what it’s supposed to be either (though most of it, to me, looks quite authentic). Nothing is real. About the only thing about it that I disliked was the Spartan whitewashed warehouse set – but that may be what the story calls for. And the live musical quintet arrayed upstage left adds an appropriate Weimar-ish night-clubby feel. It’s not to everyone’s taste, and I certainly wouldn’t take the kids, but I enjoyed *The Ballad of Mack and Ginny*, and Whelan and Watson’s performances in it, a great deal.

The program closed with the NY premiere of *Suite Branca*, danced by the Brazilian contemporary dance company, Grupo Corpo. The piece is very good, and the 21 Grupo Corpo dancers are sensational.

It’s tempting to describe *Suite Branca* (choreographed by Cassi Abbranches to a composition of the same name by Samuel Rosa) as a kitchen sink of contemporary movement, since practically every movement quality under the sun is included in it somewhere. But labelling like that implies that there’s disorganization to the piece, and nothing could be further from the truth.



(http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.2.Grupo-Corpo_Suite-Branca-_by-Jose-Luiz-Pederneiras-e1476032917977.jpg)

Grupo Corpo dancers
in Cassi Abranches's "Suite Branca"
Photo Jose Luiz Pederneiras

Suite Branca is a contemporary dance of epic proportions, filling the stage one moment; almost emptying it the next, and although abstract, it overflows the stage boundaries with life. Deconstructing it into its component choreographic parts – aside from being virtually impossible to do – would also be unwise. Here, the whole is far more than the sum of its parts. And although I tend to bristle at crotch lifts, which are omnipresent here, in context there was nothing about that that was in any way salacious or offensive. Overriding it all is the choreographic intelligence that inserts 'echoes' when they're least expected, including one at the piece's conclusion that is simple, brief, and a visual knockout that ties it all together.

My one regret is that the listing of the Grupo Corpo dancers isn't made in a way that can identify them with their featured highlights in the piece. But perhaps that's for the best – they're all superb.

Program 3

Although I can appreciate the skill involved in hip-hop in general and break dance in particular, a dance comprised of it in its entirety usually leaves me bored after a few minutes. But the dance presented by CCN de La Rochelle to open Program 3, the U.S. premiere of *Opus 14*, impressed me.

Choreographed by Artistic Director Kader Attou to music by Regis Baillet (*Diaphane*), the dance goes on too long, but it's filled with astonishing examples of choreographed break dance designed more to emphasize the talent of the dancers than to impose the style on the viewer. Interposed with twisting body sculpture and intimate arm and hand movement are examples of ability that, in a different context, would match that of the finest male ballet dancers (the 16 member company includes, by my unofficial observation, 14 men). Seeing one of these dancers endlessly rotate his body on the palm of one hand is no less miraculous and no less spectacular than seeing a dancer endlessly turn on the ball of one foot. Similarly, watching a trio of men break dance fully in sync with each other and the background music contradicts the usual sense that break dancing is haphazard and the province of individual street talent.

Ayodele Casel is a superb tap dancer, but that's not what her dance is about. Titled *While I have the Floor* (obviously a pun), Casel taps to her own words – a monologue on her growing up black and Puerto Rican and interested in tap, and the contributions of minority dancers to the genre. The information is essential to know, but it has limited entertainment appeal. It was best in those rare moments when it was funny, personal, and somewhat self-effacing. I'd like to see more of Casel's obvious talent, and less of her flag-bearing.



([http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-](http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.2.Grupo-Corpo_Suite-Branca-_by-Jose-Luiz-Pederneiras-e1476032917977.jpg)

content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.3.Hong-Kong-Ballet_1-e1476035058120.jpg)

Hong Kong Ballet dancers in Jorma Elo's "Shape of Glow"
Photo courtesy of New York City Center

Hong Kong Ballet recently appeared at the Joyce, and I reviewed the company then. Their performance of *Shape of Glow*, choreographed by Jorma Elo to music by Mozart and Beethoven, its U.S. premiere, reinforces my opinion that these dancers are highly talented. The piece isn't one of Elo's best – there's considerable frenetic movement, as well as ballet virtuosity, on display, and it would be an excellent opening piece to highlight the dancers before meatier pieces are presented, but by itself it's relatively weightless.

Several of the 16 dancers (8/8) are featured, but again, these dancers are not properly identified – which is particularly unfortunate here, since several of them deserve individual recognition.



(<http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFD.2016.3.Bangarra-dance-ensemble-Ochres-2015-Photo-by-Jhunyu-Boy-Borja-2-e1476035196200.jpg>)

Bangarra Dance Theatre dancers in "Spirit"
Photo Jhunyu Boy Borja

The program concluded with an extraordinary performance by Australia's Bangarra Dance Theatre. *Spirit* is a compendium that "showcases excerpts from the most memorable works created by Bangarra Dance Theatre during its 27 year history." As with the *Aszure Barton* piece, it's difficult to get a complete sense of the stories being told. That being said, however, a compendium is different from a condensation of an evening length ballet, and what Bangarra is doing here is educating as much as entertaining its audience (and doing so without forcing the knowledge down the audience's throat). On that level, the excerpts presented are extraordinary examples of indigenous choreography (traditional choreography is by Djakapurra Munyarryun, who also appeared as a guest artist; contemporary aspects of the presentation were choreographed by Artistic Director Stephen Page).

Like many other examples of indigenous dance that I've had the opportunity to see, these dances are less vigorous than ritualistic – but they're intricate, meaningful, and reverential. Even when moving at a snail's pace, the images are breathtaking.

On to new discoveries in Week Two.

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Jerry has been reviewing dance and dance-related performances for CriticalDance for more than ten years, and has also interviewed dancers and members of the dance community. He is a member of Dance Critics Association. A graduate of Rutgers University and Columbia University School of Law, he attended his first live ballet performance on a whim more than forty years ago, and has been hooked ever since. Writing from the point of view of a member of the audience rather than as a dance practitioner, his wealth of viewing experience not only provides an appreciation of the art form and the power of a choreographer and dancer to move an audience, but an ability to place what he sees in a context and make it accessible to the average reader.



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