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Review: Choreographer Trey McIntyre's creative leap

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Ballet -- being a part of the natural world -- evolves according to a Darwinian scheme like everything else.

One has worried aplenty, sitting in a dark theater, if what we used to call classical dance hadn't gone right off the rails and belly-flopped into the muck with the creatures that refuse to get up and walk.

Trey McIntyre Project restored some faith during its debut performance Saturday at Cal State Los Angeles' Luckman Theater.

Kansas native McIntyre, who cut his choreographic teeth with many years at Houston Ballet, approaches choreography with a vacuum-cleaner-like equanimity. Much has been sucked into his bag: simple walks, runs and head rolls, but also stock-still passé, crisply articulated petit allegro and rounded port de bras à la British style.

That alone wouldn't make him unique. The difference is in the rhythm; that is, he's actually got some -- making brainy choices about a dance's tempo, harmony and timbre. Audience members can see the music, hear the dancers and occasionally feel it under our own skin.

In "(serious)," McIntyre paired three dancers -- Chanel DaSilva, Jason Hartley and Brett Perry -- to two different trio compositions by modern American composer Henry Cowell.

The dancing stopped and started abruptly to parallel the music's unexpected twists and turns, though not its every note.

The movement mix was especially eclectic. A nervous indecision propelled the threesome. Hartley's arms fluttered, and he batted at the sky. The dancers left the comfort of unison poses with a jerk, but then inevitably returned to the collective. Rat-a-tat-tat robotic phrases ended in unwary stillness.

Dressed anonymously alike in oxford shirts and slacks (costumes by Sandra Woodall), the three barely acknowledged one another even when together. Perry, a wiry and lightning fast dancer, was odd man out initially, while DaSilva and Hartley shared an emotionless duet. The final section tied it and them together, with the three dancers facing one another in a triangle. They launched into a pas de trois of magnetic attraction and opposing, repellent force. In a last graceful gesture, DaSilva leapt high into their arms and they stood sculpture-like and precarious, a clump of humanity.

“(serious)” is McIntyre's latest work and has its official premiere in Portland, Ore., in two weeks. He has said it was inspired by a dream he had about director Charlie Kaufman.

In “Leatherwing Bat” (2008), created to treasured folk recordings by Peter, Paul and Mary, some of which feature children singing along, McIntyre wears his heart on its sleeve. His choreography displayed childhood as both a carefree romp and a bone-chilling nightmare.

The long-legged John Michael Schert as Dad and Virginia Pilgrim as Mom appeared to scare but then comfort their son, portrayed by Perry. He whipped about the stage, arms wrapped tighter than a straitjacket. While another threesome skipped gaily at the zoo, Perry was troubled. A gorgeous duet for Schert and Perry to “Puff (The Magic Dragon)” ended as does the song: with Puff -- Schert again -- sad, alone, and walking slowly toward the backdrop, with a spotlight closing on him before the song even ended.

In “A Day in the Life” (2006, made for Washington Ballet) McIntyre conjured visual pictures to classic Beatles tunes. This piece was the weakest of the evening, having a saccharine, cheerleader feel to it. The exception was the last, title song, with the outstanding Hartley as an Everyman figure of existential depth.

This was the one work with ballerinas in toe shoes, and it was a welcome change. McIntyre has devised gorgeous male partnering work but relegates his female dancers to the background too often. But nothing stays the same, and certainly Trey McIntyre Project will keep on evolving. We can look forward to the journey.