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DANCE REVIEW | TREY MCINTYRE PROJECT

Company Man: Freelance Choreographer

No More

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This might not be the most propitious of economic moments to start a ballet company. Then again, it never is, and Trey McIntyre, a 39-year-old Kansas-born choreographer who has been a prolific and successful freelancer since his early 20s, has taken the plunge. On Wednesday night at Jacob's Pillow, at the Ted Shawn Theater, Mr. McIntyre officially abandoned the joys of the freelance life with the debut of his new fulltime troupe, the Trey McIntyre Project.

There are obvious comparisons to be made between Mr. McIntyre's enterprise and that of Christopher Wheeldon, who took a similarly brave (or rash) step by founding his new company, Morphoses, last year. But the stakes are lower for Mr. McIntyre, whose group will be based in Boise, Idaho, and whose reputation is solid without any of the heir-to-Balanchine fanfare that has accompanied Mr. Wheeldon's career.

Watching Mr. McIntyre's work, it's easy to see why he is successful and why he is less heralded. On the Jacob's Pillow program, which included two premieres and a 2003 work, there were some obvious influences: Twyla Tharp, Jerome Robbins and William Forsythe, whose sharp allegro footwork and pulled-back shoulders and arms permeate quite a bit of the choreography.

Mr. McIntyre stitches these references into seamless wholes — he is above all an excellent craftsman, moving dancers in beautiful spatial patterns, flawlessly interchanging ensembles and soloists, and getting the dancers on and off the stage with

unobtrusive skill. He is also possessed of an easy showmanship; he knows how to set off his dancers to great advantage, how to time a movement to make an audience gasp, and how to paint a striking stage picture.

But his work rarely feels wholly personal, wholly possessed of a voice of its own. That may in fact be part of its appeal; what is new is almost by definition disorienting and difficult to see at first. Mr. McIntyre's choreography rarely contains such challenges, but when it does it offers a glimpse of what might make him great rather than good.

Such a glimpse occurs in his new "Leatherwing Bat," which beautifully straddles the line between the whimsical and the poignant, never allowing easy definition of its intent. It's set to songs by Peter, Paul and Mary, and the willfully childlike lyrics ("I've been swallowed by a boa constrictor," "Daddy's taking us to the zoo") work in odd yet resonant tandem with the focused movement, which shakes ballet's tight forms into looser shapes with a lovely fluidity and use of idiomatic, everyday gesture.

Mr. McIntyre's six dancers form a small world of their own — loving partners, friends, responsible parents, sleepy children — in not-quite-literal echoes of the songs. The effect is both charming and disconcerting, with a hovering sense of the imminent loss of innocence underlining the cheerful engagements onstage. At the end of the piece, the excellent Brett Perry and John Michael Schert (a beautiful dancer of Apollonian proportions and elegance) move with truncated, graceful inflections to the final verses of "Puff, the Magic Dragon." Then, as the lyrics tell of Puff's abandonment, Mr. Perry leaves and Mr. Schert backs away slowly into the fading light. It's a moment of sudden melancholy, and a suggestion that Mr. McIntyre can make magic.

The other premiere on the program, "Surrender," is less successful. A duo, set to the odd musical trio of Grand Funk Railroad, Tchaikovsky ("Dance of the Mirlitons" from "The Nutcracker") and Regina Spektor, it tries hard for quirky allure in a Tharpian mix (sudden catches and throws recalling "Nine Sinatra Songs" keep recurring) of male-female aggression, seduction and dependence. Nicely performed by Chanel DaSilva and

Jason Hartley (a balding, stocky man who moves with quicksilver agility), it's just about the sum of its parts.

The final piece on the program, "The Reassuring Effects (of Form and Poetry)," is a bright and playful manifestation of contemporary ballet prowess. Set to Dvorak's Serenade in E (Op. 22,) it offers a Robbins-like vision of dancers as a community (and echoes, presumably deliberately, the opening of the slow movement of Robbins's "Brandenburg") but sharpens the movement with studied inelegancies and sudden alterations of classical positions.

Mr. McIntyre is almost always wonderfully musical, and if the relentless comings and goings of the eight dancers starts to blur after a while, he does at several moments evoke a lovely sense of mystery in his slow revolving groupings and occasionally cryptic gestures. But not often enough. "The Reassuring Effects" is perhaps a little too reassuring; Mr. McIntyre is capable of making us work harder.