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Dance Review | “Elemental Brubeck”

A Leaping Man in Red, Propelled by Classic Brubeck

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Breezy, fluid and engaging, Lar Lubovitch’s “Elemental Brubeck” received its American premiere Tuesday night at the Skirball Center at New York University. It was also the dance’s first performance by the choreographer’s own company. Mr. Lubovitch made the work - set to extracts from Dave Brubeck’s 1963 jazz suite “Time Changes” - for the San Francisco Ballet’s visit to Paris in July, and its clean, lucid lines are clearly tailored to classically trained dancers.

“Elemental Brubeck” opens with a long and **exciting** solo for a man (Rasta Thomas) dressed simply in red, whipping over the stage with huge jumps that are punctuated by jazzy twists of the torso and swiveling hips. Mr. Lubovitch uses Mr. Brubeck’s melodic score to play with jazz dance conventions, but the bent knees, circling wrists and final dramatic backbend all look, rather charmingly, as if they are between quotation marks rather than truly intended for Broadway. This has much to do with the innate good taste and nuanced phrasing that informs Mr. Thomas’s **spectacular**, crystal-clear performance. Without this, the solo might run the risk of tackiness; here, it looks like **pure fun**.

Mr. Lubovitch follows with a duo, danced by Griff Braun and Rebecca Rigert, that makes full use of the lush piano and saxophone musings of Mr. Brubeck’s “Theme From Elementals.” Ms. Rigert, dressed in full-skirted orange, revolves continually around Mr. Braun - at one point, held aloft to **magical**, floating effect. The romance is in the dance rather than between the performers, who seem **enchanted** with the easy invention of their movement rather than with each other.



Rasta Thomas of Lar Lubovitch Dance Co. in “Elemental Brubeck”

In the third section - which, like the others, opens in silence - three couples move in swirling, circular formations to a more percussive, dramatic beat. Mr. Lubovitch skillfully composes series of sequential lifts and creates echoes of movements or phrases between the pairs as the men repeatedly swing the women around their bodies, their legs and arms swooping in broad arcs. Brief duos, all vividly danced, intermittently interrupt the group, but toward the end all return, only to melt away and leave the stage to Mr. Thomas for the final, big-jumping moments.

“Elemental Brubeck” isn’t ground-breaking or an ambitious work; it’s simply a nicely made, easy-on-the-eye dance that gently evokes old-fashioned movie musicals and teenage socials. But creating such a piece is, in fact, no mean feat; that Mr. Lubovitch can make it look so effortless says much.

The second half of the program featured the choreographer’s deservedly much-praised “Men’s Stories,” in which nine **outstanding** dancers offer up their autobiographies in physical form. All were wonderful, but Scott Rink, Michael Leon Thomas and Patrick Corbin especially so.