Joffrey ends 3-day stand, having made many friends

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The Joffrey Ballet has packed its costumes and sent its dancers up the road by now, having ended a three-day stand — the first in five years here — and leaving behind mixed impressions and lots of fans.

Presented by the Society for the Performing Arts in Jones Hall, the ensemble company, which avoids the usual designations of principal, soloist, corps and others, is clearly well-drilled for the most part, and certain of the dancers are strong, precise and wonderfully personalized. Others are smooth and fast but don't come near artist status. The Joffrey is, in this sense, uneven, despite the fact that the presentations come off so cleverly and audiences are inevitably ready to whistle and cheer.

Saturday night was Arpino night in Jones Hall — four works by the company's associate director and chief choreographer, now celebrating 25 years with the company. (Charles Ward's review of Sunday's program of three works follows this review.)

An important aspect of the Joffrey Ballet is, year in and year out, the driving interest of director Robert Joffrey to respond to the times, to make use of various disciplines, to try new works, to rejoice in ideas, to make dance that is also theater.

Classically based, but freely utilizing movements of all kinds, the Joffrey troupe danced with its usual energy and smooth techniques in two works new to Houston and two seen here previously. The Houston premieres were *Round of Angels*, which easily was the pride of the evening, and *Valentine*. Revivals were *Kettentanz* and *Light Rain*.

Dedicated to the memory of a Joffrey colleague who died in 1982, *Round of Angels* once again made use of the piercingly poignant Mahler Adagietto from Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor. Featuring a group of five men and one woman, Leslie Carothers, all in celestial silver, *Round of Angels* is an intense, flowing work, in which bodies moved, impersonal but interacting, almost like beautifully polished machine parts. The piece's mood is sad, and yet the dancers appeared motivated beyond themselves, not allowing any moment for tristesse, though it is so achingly expressed in the music.

Valentine, on the other hand, is a saucy, witty, wacko interplay between Beatriz Rodriguez and David Palmer as antagonists in a whimsical boxing ring. It is Arpino's notion that these two would appear in their corners in jackets with their initials, dance about, shadowbox a little and warm up to the love match. Meanwhile, the bespectacled umpire, Alvin Brehm, plays the droll score of Jacob Druckman onstage on his string bass, making scratchy and humpy sounds as he strikes the strings or the shell of his contrabass, and finally topples over backward. Here was Arpino in his cool, collected, amusing, slightly cute mode, and the

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Leslie Carothers and Tyler Walters of the Joffrey Ballet dance in Mark Haim's *The Gardens of Boboli*.

Arpino shows that he is prolific

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piece prospered with these two dancers and this plugged-in ump, all of whom enjoyed the fun and the surprising positions they found themselves in.

A salute to Vienna of the court galas, *Kettentanz* is a substantial workout — 10 movements for 12 dancers, who keep the stage awhirl for more than 30 minutes, in various groupings and rhythms. Two varied trios were delightful — two men (Mark Goldweber and Tom Mossbrucker) with delicate Kim Sagami followed by two women (Jodie Gates and Julie Janus) with Glenn Edgerton, to Johann Strauss Sr.'s effervescent rhythms. The high point was Carothers' outstanding sustained work, all en pointe, in the Schneffler Tanz set to Johann Mayer's music.

Arpino wrapped it up with an obsessive piece that began with the group clustered together (not unlike the start of *Angels* or Joseph Chaikin's *The Serpent*, for that matter). The Eastern-style rhythms of East-West fusion, as practiced by Douglas Adams and Russ Gauthier with their outfit Light Rain, served as the intoxicating force behind the final ballet called *Light Rain*. It built to an obsessive climax, erotic, circling, the 14 dancers responding to the dry, hollow, pulsing sounds of the maracas, bamboo flutes, banjos and other instruments.

Arpino is amazingly prolific, but he runs the risk of being facile. There is movement, there is bold music, there are ideas, but Arpino seems all to willing to stop short of the more mentally engaging balletic challenge.

Often the Joffrey on this visit showed us movement that was pleasant but not breathtakingly difficult nor especially thrilling in its execution. Nonetheless, the company is to be admired for a number of things: the maintenance of its large, varied repertoire, and the continued emphasis on sharp staging and integral use of important music; the live interest in so many different choreographers including new, young ones as well as matured familiar ones. Its dancers are attractive and skilled, and the presence of the local orchestra in the pit under the Joffrey Ballet's own conductors was a plus.

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Though the Joffrey Ballet had two Houston premieres on its final program, the company's rousingly affecting performance of Sir Frederick Ashton's 1937 classic, *Les Patineurs*, left the most pleasing impression.

The premiere pieces, Mark Haim's *The Gardens of Boboli* and James Kudelka's *The Heart of the Matter*, were brand new this year. As seen Sunday afternoon in Jones Hall, both had strong choreographic qualities. Each was flawed in a quite different way.

In *Boboli*, Haim showed an unusually effective ability to build striking contemporary movement on a classical base. As seen in the opening, elegant pas deux, he was consistently successful in providing fresh and vivid material for the work's solo, duet and trio.

That creativeness didn't carry into the ensemble movements. They either petered out choreographically or got bogged down in a fussy logic that didn't work visually.

The odd quality about *The Heart of the Matter*, set to Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 2, was that the middle two movements simply could have been eliminated.

Kudelka developed a classic story of a relationship — a man and a woman coming out of unrelated groups to meet — but he did so with an austerity, a coolness, that at times defied the music and yet set up a much more affective tension.

The pas de deux ending the first movement was striking — building intensity by delaying the physical contact between the dancers. That tension was developed further in the long and complicated duet of the final movement, where Denise Jackson and Philip Jerry found a brilliantly tight balance between the coolness and the intensity.

Meanwhile, two other movements of dance intervened. They were attractive. They were irrelevant. They interrupted the subject matter at hand.

After that intensity, *Les Patineurs* was wonderfully lighthearted.

The string of divertissements, rooted in the movements of skaters gliding on the ice, brought the kind of dancing that naturally evokes applause. Mark Goldweber was the male soloist with the big moves — he needed just a little more impish humor — while Jackson and Jerry returned the more cerebrally cool dancing as the couple in white.

— CHARLES WARD

David Palmer and Beatriz Rodriguez in Gerald Arpino's *Valentine*.