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fine young company -

## Double Pleasure in Olympia: Joffrey II, Rebuilt Theater

By WAYNE LEE

I HAD a double treat on Feb. 4 when I traveled to Olympia to see the Joffrey II Dancers. Not only did I see what is undoubtedly the best junior ballet company in this country, but I finally got to visit the Washington Center for the Performing Arts.

More about the Joffrey in a minute. For now, let me sing the praises of the WPCA. The 982-seat, 3-balcony hall - a major renovation of an old theater - has been open for about a year now. I couldn't tell much about the acoustics, since all the music was on tape, but the sightlines seem to be excellent and the decor is simple and tasteful. I was also impressed with the management, which has been booking such quality groups as the Peking Acrobats, the Seattle Symphony and the Vienna Choir Boys.

And it will soon be even better. Phase II of the building project will be completed in about 10 months and will add a 2,600-foot "black box" for rehearsals or studio performances, a formal conference room, an atrium space and staff offices. This fine new theater complex will be a tremendous boon to this region's performing arts, for years to come.

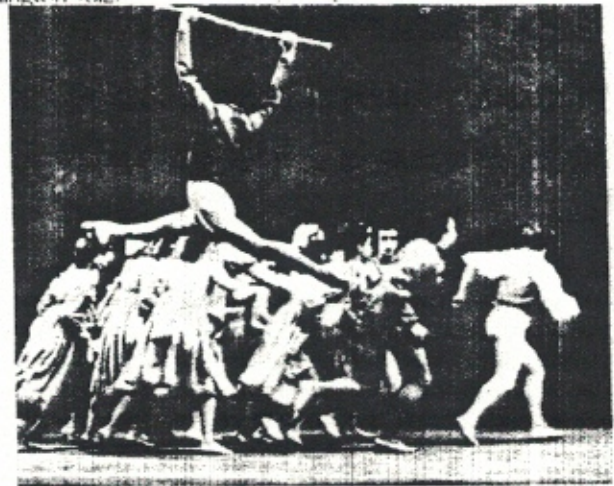
THE main reason for my visit was, of course, to see the Joffrey II, which also performed in Eugene and Bellingham on this extensive tour. The company was founded in 1969 by Robert Joffrey and Gerald Arpino, who both grew up in Seattle and studied here with Mary Ann Wells. It is a classical company of 16 dancers and apprentices, age 16-22, hand-picked by Joffrey and current artistic director Richard Englund, also of Seattle.

The dancers come from all over the United States and usually stay in the company about two years. Eighty percent of them join the Joffrey Ballet, while other alumni have gone on to dance with such name troupes as the American Ballet Theater, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, the Martha Graham Dance Company and the Netherlands Dance Theater.

The Olympia performance - virtually sold out - showed the young company to be superbly trained, highly professional and thoroughly engaging. It is a rare treat to see young dancers like these, with all their youthful exuberance and desire to please - especially knowing that many of them almost certainly will be going on to stardom.

In fact, Englund told me that three of his performers will be joining the main company almost immediately. Two of those, Cynthia Giannini and Brent Phillips, danced the leads in the Grand Pas from Petipa's classical 1898 ballet, *Raymonda*, to music by Glazounov. Typical of the Joffrey's emphasis on classical training, the couple showed clean footwork, strong lines and admirable understanding of style.

Another member who may be making the jump to the main company this year is Joseph Schnell, from Fairbanks. Schnell was featured in the company's premiere of Matthew J. Wright's modern ballet, *Visitation*. The melancholic piece, set to a Dvorak sonata, features Schnell as a lonely, anguished young man who is teased and



BALLET DE FRANCE in *Romeo et Juliette* (music of Berlioz, choreography by New Zealand-born Gray Veredon), presented by Ballet Oregon at Portland Civic Aud. Thursday, March 12. First West Coast tour is under patronage of City of Paris. +

tormented by four idealized visions of feminine beauty and unattainability.

Schnell, who shows remarkable strength and lyricism, also was featured in an athletic solo and contortionistic male trio in Mark Haim's quirky 1986 work, *The Gardens of Boboli*. The six-movement piece, danced to the music of Albinoni, showcased the dancer's abilities to move extremely fast and incorporate modern dance gesture into the ballet fabric, but represented the worst kind of superficial, self-conscious "fusion for fusion's sake."

Rounding out the program was the charming pas de deux from Bourmonville's *Flower Festival at Genzano*. Tiny Mary Barton and muscular Alexander Sukonnik, originally from the Soviet Union, captured wonderfully the sweetness and elegance of the romantic style. They were helped immeasurably, no doubt, by the meticulous staging of Toni Lander.

The Joffrey II Dancers are a company that seems capable of mastering almost any dance style, especially the classical disciplines. The dancers are fast, strong, well-rehearsed and have commendable stage presence. Unfortunately, they haven't played Seattle since 1973.

A FINAL note about the Joffrey Ballet. Englund mentioned that the main company currently is in the process of restoring and restaging Arpino's *Clowns*, due to open in Chicago this month. The anti-nuke ballet was considerably ahead of its time and should be better received now than during its premiere in 1968. The original production featured our own Frank Bays and Ray Bussey, along with Gary Chryst, Christian Holder and Zelma Bustillo in the leads. The commissioned score is by Hershy Kay and costumes by Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes.

Maybe some local presenter will bring *Clowns* and these two fine ballet companies back to Seattle. . .

Wayne Lee is a frequent writer on dance for the Seattle Times. +

A few esoteric critics have intellectualized dance to the point where I am bored stiff. Dance is not esoteric. -GERALD ARPINO