

ENTERTAINMENT

Hope springs eternal in Joffrey II

Dance review

By Robert Merritt

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It seemed to be a particularly young Joffrey II dance company that came through Richmond for two Carpenter Center performances over the weekend, but with a combination of talent and youthful exuberance the dancers managed to give audiences numbering a little better than 1,000 people a day confidence in the future of ballet.

There were lots of bobbles and the timing was at least less than perfect, particularly at a Saturday program of shorter works, but these 16 dancers (ages 16 to 22) still managed to show their wares with style.

It was an awkward two-day program. The highlight should have been yesterday afternoon's full-length production of "Beauty and the Beast," a work choreographed by Joffrey II director Richard Englund last year using the romantic music of Alexander Glazunov.

What should have been a grand classical work, however, fell flat. Lisette Salgado stepped in for the injured Mariene Kandall and did a wonderful job as Beauty. Her dancing was perhaps the most fearless of the two days, her balance and poise work as erect and poised as her expression and charm were alive with character.

The problem is that Englund gave the company

so little dancing to do. Beginning with a dreadfully dull prologue, things remain slow through Act I, when Englund creates a wonderful scene of forest animals and a smoke-filled stage, then does nothing with it beyond some fancy posing.

Act 2 finally provides a series of three diversiments featuring the young women of the company, but the work is still a lot of story and very little ballet. There is finally a nice diversion for Ms. Salgado and Adam Skute, who plays the beast-transformed-into-a-prince, and when the story is over, Englund has added a glorifying apodosis where he finally gives the corps some room to move.

What little dancing this "Beauty and the Beast" had to offer was nice, but there simply wasn't enough.

Saturday evening's repertoire also, had kinks. The program opened with "The Gardens of Bohol," a 1986 work created by Mark Hahn to some nice baroque concert from Tommaso Albinoni. It is a didactic work in six sections designed to show off the various possibilities of ballet, and perhaps because of this mission — so contained in each section — the company not only knew what it was looking for, but also delivered.

Tracy Sartorio and Skute opened with a duet that was gently athletic, followed by a playful ensemble piece, a somber expression of flexibility and strength for three male dancers, a graceful

divertissement for four women, then a strong male solo by Skute and a final ensemble to express the pure joy of dance.

"Trys," a new Diane Coburn Brunning ballet set to Sergei Prokofiev's String Quartet No. 2 in F major, was the boldest effort on the program but was not a particularly likable work. Surreal and modern, it was an eccentric display of movement, with what was at times an almost eerie physicality, and it achieved its best moments during a slow adagio.

The young dancers also showed their appreciation for the classics. Jennifer Mattingly filled in for the injured Ms. Kandall in the pas de deux from August Bournoisville's romantic "Flower Festival at Genzano," paired with Robert Conn, who proved to be a company standout.

They weren't entirely up to the refinements of the classic tradition, but they made up for it with character, showing us young love the way it should be.

Ms. Salgado, who would come back to star in yesterday's performance, also turned in a stellar performance Saturday, paired with the energetic Skute in the Grand Pas from Martin Petipa's "Raymonda." She didn't come close to presenting the grown-up character she was attempting to portray, but it would be difficult to imagine a more fearless performance of the steps.

The future of ballet, at least at the Joffrey, seems in good hands, but it has some growing to do.



IN GOOD HANDS — A young Joffrey II dance company gave Richmond audiences confidence in the future of ballet.