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## Review: SDP hasn't broken free of ballet's constraints just yet

By Michael Upchurch  
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Seattle Dance Project is a curious beast. It's a troupe of veteran dancers whose artistic directors, Timothy Lynch and Julie Tobiason, both with strong Pacific Northwest Ballet backgrounds, have been vocal about wanting to break away from ballet convention and forge something new. But too often, SDP's efforts seem constrained by a ballet-inflected decorum that waters down their attempts to experiment.

In "Project 3," they've commissioned new works by rising choreographer Edwaard Liang, and old friend Kent Stowell, the former artistic director of PNB. They also showcase a fine work for solo dancer by Mark Haim and reprise two pop-tune suites that got their first outings last fall.

The good news first: "No more sweet hours of Rapture" is a perfect match between choreographer Haim and dancer Betsy Cooper. Set to a mournful Mozart aria, it uses startling, disorienting light changes to confound Cooper as she pushes, writhes and rises against the music, not quite wanting to go along with what it's telling her.

At times the gamine Cooper calls to mind Giulietta Masina, the great Fellini star. When the longer, lankier Oleg Gorboulev takes over the role on Feb. 5 and 6, "Rapture" may well become an entirely different piece.

Edwaard Liang's "To Converse Too" is more of an ensemble effort, spiced with tasty duets, trios and solos, all set to selections from Bach's six cello suites. It's a concoction of weavings, twinings and chain reactions that opens with six dancers in silhouette. Rooted like sea anemones, they gradually break loose from their confines and into the light.

Liang, who's said the piece is about the way our communication efforts slip past each other, is going for something fleet and pliant, and quite often gets it — especially from Cooper, Lynch and, in one nice solo passage, Joseph Anderson. Still, there are sequences that look a bit too much like work. Maybe with repeat performances SDP will tap deeper into the sense of flow this one needs.

Stowell's duet, "B6," is more problematic. Set to a jaunty, angular violin-and-piano duo by William Bolcom, it has the promise of something sly, savvy and light. But in Anderson's and Michelle Curtis' hands, its mood is curiously imprecise. "Veteran dancer" doesn't translate into fine-tuned theatricality here, despite Curtis' clean lines and Anderson's dapper duds.

Cooper's "In Another Land" and James Canfield's "Because," greatly improved in presentation from last fall, still just seem a mismatch of moves and music. Lynch overcomes this in a solo to "Yesterday" — but it's hard to take balletic leaps and flurries seriously when you're listening to "Gimme Shelter."

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