

DANCE REVIEW / Barbara Figue Fox

A varied program from the Joffrey II

Small companies can take ballet to the highways and byways of America, to the wilderness of small theaters with affordable tickets. Of course, more people will buy tickets to a small company if it has the same name as a larger troupe, and so it is no accident that Joffrey II and Alvin Ailey Repertory Dance Ensemble are popular bookings.

Rider hosted the Ailey troupe last spring and The Joffrey II Dancers performed there on Saturday. The difference isn't just modern dance versus ballet. Whereas several in the Ailey troupe are veterans of several seasons, Richard Englund, now director of Joffrey II (formerly director of ABT II) has a policy of "up or out."

The troupe is truly a training ground for young dancers, and after one year of being paid a minimum stipend, the youngsters (some only 17 or 18 years old) often join the main company or are encouraged to obtain another job. Jeremy Blanton is the associate director.

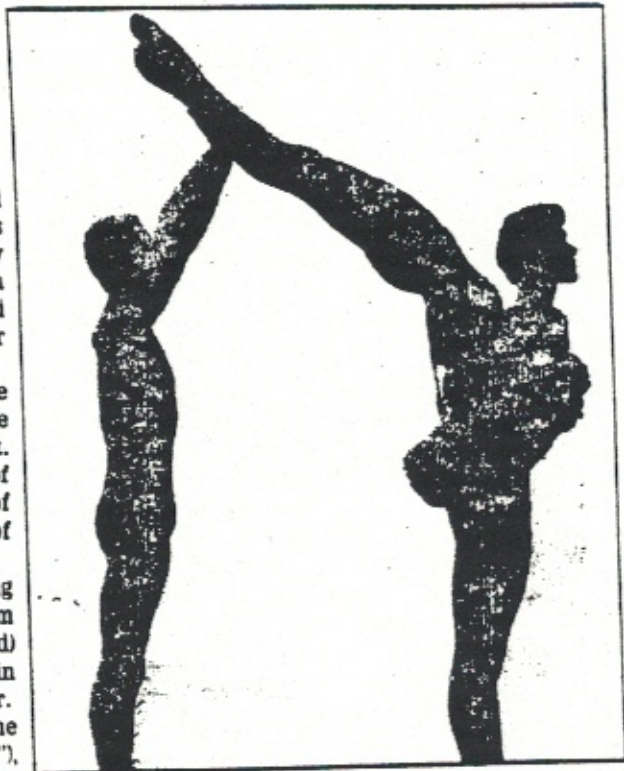
The varied and accessible program included one traditional "short tutu" ballet ("Grand Pas: Raymonda"), one Bournonville pas de deux with old-fashioned charm ("Flower Festival at Genzano"), one piece steeped in mysterious drama ("Passage" by James Kudelka) and a brash, physical, modern piece (Mark Haim's new "The Gardens of Boboli," which joins the main company's repertory this month at City Center in New York.

Alexander Sukonnik survived the difficult Bournonville beats with grace, and his partner Cynthia Giannini was appropriately charming, though they could have had more fun with their flirtation.

The company is well coached; there seemed to be a preponderance of double turns in the air that landed on one knee, a favorite alternative ending for young dancers who might otherwise waffle the finish.

The sumptuous choral music of Thomas Tallis provided an ethereal background for a spiritual-seeming "Passage" in which Brent Phillips, clad in a loincloth like a Vesalius drawing, makes a classical abstract solo statement. Then he encounters passers-by, male and female, and he partners them, giving each his careful attention, cradling one, lifting another, turning with a third.

Most don't even seem to know he's there at first, but some then recognize him. Twice he crumples into a heap that has the lines of a Pieta, and two women raise him up. The piece closes with Phillips once more in a dim solo spot.



Joffrey II dancers in "The Gardens of Boboli."

Kudelka provides enough substance so that you take something home to think about, but he isn't so specific that you need to worry about "getting" it.

Haim's piece, at the start of the program, knocked you off guard with unexpected surprises. Meg Gurin and Adam Sklute begin with circular lifts, glycerin smooth in long adagio phrases, with unexpected patterns. Lisette Salgado leads an ensemble in a contrasting perky section with ordinary steps (attitudes, for instance) taken out of the ordinary by quick-flash repetition, interspersed by resounding plops on the floor.

The themes in the first section (a barely perceptible back contraction) repeated more visibly in succeeding sections, producing a satisfying unity.

Shane Gregory and Sklute partner Joseph Schnell in eyebrow-raising splits, limp or extended lifts and other smoothly geometric patterns. Women introduce the next section by stepping into gentle arcs of on-point suspensions. Gurin returns with her lyrical phrasing arching like a violin solo over a more mundane base. Her soft theme, burying her head in her arm, becomes a harsh flinging of the arm, as the women circle, reminiscent of the willis in "Giselle." At the close, two groups alternate, spinning in new kinds of pirouettes, then collapsing in floor-thwacking falls.