



Pacific Northwest Ballet company dancers in Jerome Robbins' "Dances at a Gathering"— Photo by Angela Sterling



Pacific Northwest Ballet soloist Ezra Thomson (center) with company dancers in Jerome Robbins' "West Side Story Suite" — Photo by Angela Sterling



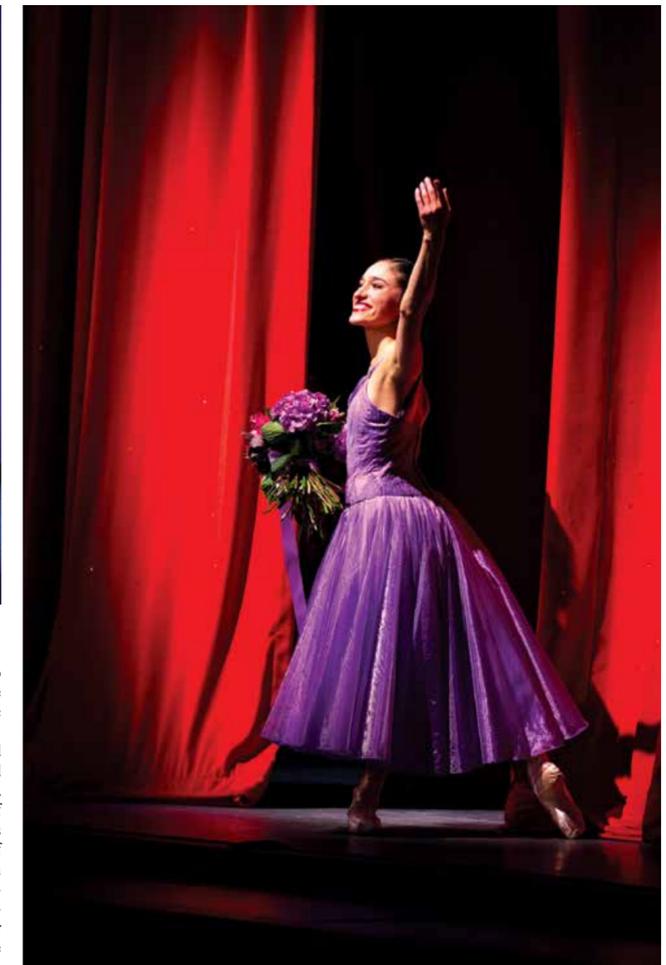
Pacific Northwest Ballet company dancers in Jerome Robbins' "In the Night" — Photo by Angela Sterling



Pacific Northwest Ballet company dancers in Jerome Robbins' "The Concert (or, The Perils of Everybody)" — Photo by Angela Sterling



Pacific Northwest Ballet principal dancers Seth Orza and Noelani Pantastico in Jerome Robbins' "Other Dances"— Photo by Angela Sterling



On Opening Night of Pacific Northwest Ballet's Jerome Robbins Festival, it was announced that PNB soloist Leta Biasucci was being promoted to principal dancer. — Photo by Angela Sterling

PNB
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side-by-side with the more celebrated George Balanchine to make the New York City Ballet an international success, so it's only right that he stands alone in the spotlight for a change. His special approach to dance, as well as his love for the music of Frédéric Chopin, are on delightful and beautiful display. It doesn't matter which program you attend — both presentations are so full of pleasure that you will come away from McCaw Hall with a dreamy smile on your face.

The tone for both A and B programs is set by "Circus Polka," a short work to the music of Igor Stravinsky designed to show off the skills of ballet students. PNB has a successful training school for young dancers, so this piece was a treat for parents and audience alike. Normally we only see children dancing onstage during the Christmas run of "George Balanchine's Nutcracker," but "Circus Polka" proves that Robbins was as skilled as Balanchine at maneuvering quantities of kids across a stage, each at the proper level of development. It begins with a ringmaster

striding onstage in a red coat and top hat — on opening night Artistic Director and Director of the PNB School, Peter Boal, did the honors — and calls onstage three ranks of tutu-clad dancers: first 16 girls in blue, who execute a sequence of steps to create a circus ring around the master, followed by 16 younger girls in green, then very tiny dancers in pink — 48 girls in all. They skip, march, bow, jump, and scamper through formations that are as pleasing as any corps de ballet sequence. On both nights I attended the audience burst into applause when the dancers formed a three-ring carousel of opposing circles, prancing like ponies to Stravinsky's delightful music.

The A program continues with the mesmerizing "In the Night," set to Chopin's beguiling nocturnes. Four couples explore the many dimensions of love, from the first crush to seasoned friendship. Words like GORGEOUS, WONDERFUL, and BEAUTIFUL are scrawled all over my notebook. And for "Other Dances," to Chopin's piano mazurkas, I wrote CHARMING and BIG SMILE! Not very articulate, but very sincere. The only thing better than Chopin's music is great choreography to his music — and dancers who execute it beautifully.

Also in the A program is the "West Side Story Suite" that revisits Robbins' and Leonard Bernstein's long running Broadway show based on *Romeo and Juliet*. The gang conflict between the Sharks and the Jets seemed a bit old-fashioned (Where are the guns? Do they really stop beating each other up at the sound of a police whistle?) but the final number seemed more relevant than ever. "There's a Place for Us" could be the theme song of every immigrant in the world. Stephen Sondheim's timeless lyrics are so full of hope that you can almost see a better world past all the cruelty and corruption that never seems to go away.

My favorite dance of the evening, however, is "Afternoon of a Faun" — cleverly set in a dance studio. The faun is a ballet boy, the nymph is a ballerina, both in practice clothes, entwining each other to Debussy's lush music while checking their moves in the mirror — the 4th wall — giving the audience a peeping-Tom's view of their movements. When the faun finally looks straight at the nymph and gives her a kiss on the cheek, their entry into a real world makes a climax better than sex.

The B Program contains Robbins' longer works — "Dances at a Gathering" and "The Concert." Both are set to the music of Chopin, but with two very different moods. "The Concert" is a hilarious send-up of concert-goers and their foibles, as an on-stage pianist (the elegant Cameron Grant) plays through a menu of Chopin favorites, richly accompanied by Emil de Cou and the PNB orchestra. The high point is Robbins' famous "Mistake Waltz" in which six under-rehearsed ballerinas bollix up their piece with comical consistency. "Dances at a Gathering," on the other hand, focuses on Chopin's mazurkas and waltzes, giving us every combination of pairs, trios, quartets and sestets and solos, exploring not only complexities of movement but complexities of emotions. We see a young man dance alone, dreaming of a partner, we see a couple who are joyous in their partnership, then an ever-building and flowing wave of relationships as they form and dissolve.

Jerome Robbins had a special affinity for Chopin, which both programs demonstrate. In "The Concert" we can hear the reason why: Chopin composed almost exclusively for the piano, and invented the

"tempo rubato" style — that dreamy, heart-wrinking technique of keeping time with the left hand while the right hand melody slows down and then hurries to catch up. It's hard to do — PNB has a line-up of wonderful pianists who can do it — and it creates a languid urgency that is pure romanticism. While the loose, pantomime approach to choreography in "The Concert" lent itself to "tempo rubato," Robbins' rapid, non-stop parade of dances in "Dances at a Gathering" seems to blunt Chopin's most characteristic effect. Pianist Christina Seimens worked her way through the eighteen waltzes, mazurkas, and etudes with great stamina and discipline, but to my ears it sounded as though both hands were keeping strict time, and that the romantic lag and hurry was missing in the right hand. If

I had a magic wand I would eliminate two or three of the shorter dances and give the heroic pianist time to do the elusive magic that Chopin invented. Nevertheless, I think Chopin would enjoy these dances as much as the delighted audience did on both nights I attended. Jerome Robbins was a choreographer of consistent quality, whose explorations of great music have given us a legacy of charm, energy, and pure beauty. He is often characterized as a great American choreographer, but I think he's a great choreographer without qualification. Come see either program A or B — or both — and experience the great Chopin through the eyes of the great Jerome Robbins. PNB is performing the Jerome Robbins Festival through September 29.