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The Milwaukee Ballet [Review of performances done by the Milwaukee Ballet]

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The Milwaukee Ballet
February 25-26, 1977
April 22-23, 1977

The expanding season of the Milwaukee Ballet has included major winter and spring concerts, together with other concerts at Century Hall and elsewhere. Artistic Director Jean Paul Comelin and Associate Director Marjorie Mussman continue to turn out major works of their own while slowly building a repertory of "classical" works of other choreographers. This approach reflects a sound philosophy toward building the company of young dancers.

Their February 25-26 concert included a premiere of Mussman's "Handel Suite", Comelin's "Sonata A Tre", "Don Quixote pas de deux", and a version of Petipas' "Raymonda pas de dix" as restaged by Robert Rodham of the Pennsylvania Ballet.

Handel's "Royal Fireworks and Water Music Suites" arranged by conductor Daniel Forlano provided the musical setting for Mussman's "Handel Suite". The dancers looked their best in this work for the company and its soloists. The dance was fresh and lively in appearance and incorporated elements of modern movement as well as pointe work. Comelin's "Sonata A Tre", set to the music of Albioni, is remarkable for the intensity and variety of shapes the dancers create as they move from supine positions into angular and tortured positions.

The dancers of the company are really very good, but their technical skills for classical works such as the "Don Quixote" are not sufficiently developed. The leg lines, for example, in the pas de deux were not clean and straight at critical moments, and partnering lacked the precision that this work depends upon for its artistic effects. The necessary elegance of form required in this pas de deux was lacking. Similar problems were evident in the "Raymonda" pas de deux. Effort showed where it should not. But the remarkable progress of the company assures us that all of this is just a matter of time and development.

The spring concert, April 22-23, of the Milwaukee Ballet featured Comelin's latest work, a premiere performance of "Beethoven's 7th - the Dance Symphony". This long musical composition requires a great amount of choreography just to fill the time. Comelin succeeds in the main in sustaining interest throughout the four movements. The first movement incorporates a large circle that addresses the universal scope of dance as an art. This movement announces the choreographer's intent "to present an anthology of the dance, a dedication to the various races throughout the world that have devised through time the symbols that express this universal and noble means of communication." A highly decorative second movement dominated by lush red costumes and intricately patterned lines of dancers weaving in and out departs from the more philosophical theme of the first movement. The dancers are not always up to the deft shifts and the lines of moving dancers become cluttered. The third movement recalls colorful peasant dancers and provides comic relief from the heavily decorative second movement. The finale, or fourth movement, produces a full corps of dancers in traditional white tutu who provide a resume of duet, trio, and corp de ballet exercises in a grand manner.

Mussman's reconstructed "A Song for Jose" and Robert Rodham's "Trio Pas de Deux" completed the spring program. Dedicated to Jose Limon, with whom Mussman worked, "A Song for Jose" is a hymn that expresses the Limon movement and themes. Eight dancers perform the eleven variation work. The phrasing is very beautiful and the dancers respond to its demands. The question would be, however, why not do a Limon piece instead? Rodham's "Trio" is the sort of work that Leslie McBeth does best: dramatic, lyrical, and very romantic. She draws everyone to her aid as she balances precariously on a beam of light that cuts diagonally across the stage. McBeth is ably partnered by Mark Diamond.

--Curtis L. Carter