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The Joffrey Ballet

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The Joffrey Ballet, internationally celebrated company of American dancers, made its first visit to Milwaukee, February 15-17, to give three evening performances and a matinee at the Performing Arts Center.

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The three-day engagement opened with Frederick Ashton's "The Dream", and included works of choreographers Twyla Tharp, George Balanchine, Alvin Ailey, Agnes de Mille, Jerome Robbins, and Ruthanna Boris. This list of choreographers promises a virtual museum exhibition of contemporary American dance, with the addition of Britain's Tudor. Two things were especially prominent in the performances: Twyla Tharp, by the magnitude of her works performed, and "cowboy" Western folk dancing as a theme.

The predominance of Tharp's choreography was especially welcome because, to the best of my knowledge, her works have not appeared in a major Milwaukee concert before. "As Time Goes By", "Deuce Coupe II", and the new "Cacklin' Hen" filled the gap for many in the audience whose only prior opportunities for viewing Tharp's work has been through television or out-of-town performances.

The second strong impression, of too many cowboys, found considerably less favor in this viewer's mind. Balanchine's "Square Dance", de Mille's "Rodeo", and Tharp's "Cacklin' Hen", all with a similar theme, provide a very heavy dose of "cowboy ballet".

Added to these, the schmaltzy gay nineties "Cakewalk" weighs heavily toward bad programming. The most charitable explanation would be an overdose of misplaced bicentennial enthusiasm -- resulting in poor judgment on the part of those who selected the program. But when "Cacklin' Hen", Tchiakovsky's "Pas de Deux", and "Cakewalk" all appeared on the Thursday evening program, it became patronizing and catered to the programmer's stereotype of what would please a midwestern, Milwaukee audience. The program misfired however, leaving the "sold out" audience with a relatively dull evening, and disappointing those who had faithfully attended all three evenings.

On the other hand, there were many notable features to the Joffrey performances. The "Rodeo" had a stronger sense of character than the recent performance of the same work in Milwaukee by the American Ballet Theatre. "Deuce Coupe II", which offered a sharply "modern"

contrast to the western look, showed robot-like figures jerking, kicking, spinning in revolt against the familiar dance conventions of ballet and modern dance. But these movements soon became dance conventions in their own vocabulary; and they were even more limited than those which they sought to replace. Nevertheless, these energetic movements designed by Twyla Tharp surprise and disarm the audience with their apparent simplicity, approaching chaos. "As Time Goes By" offers more of Tharp, but in a more abstract, formal setting. Against the Hayden music, the dance almost became a caricature of itself.

A highlight of the three-day engagement for this viewer was the performance of Jerome Robbins' "Moves, 1959", a ballet performed in silence and about relationships. "Moves" was created for Robbins' Ballet USA and was premiered at the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy. Milwaukee ballet master William Reilly performed in the 1959 premiere of this work. "Moves" provides a highly expressive statement in "pure movement". Very simple costuming with no music or scenery accents the potent movements of the dancers. Their bodies move in rows, singly and in pairs, creating a sense of architectural space that gives structure to the emotions being explored in the relationships among the dancers. Each phrase of "Moves" is so composed as to carve the silent space into organic shapes that succeed each other as time passes. The shapes of the moving bodies in this piece recall the pictorial shapes of the painter Matisse in his painting "Bathers", but the arrangement of the feelings is very much Robbins' own.

Summing up, the Joffrey Company's 1977 visit to Milwaukee brought its memorable events: Tharp, Robbins, Ailey, Ashton, and some unfortunate programming. We look forward to their future visits and we hope that more thought will be given to the programming next time. The Joffrey's visit was sponsored by the Edgewood Agency and the National Endowment for the Arts.

--Curtis L. Carter