

Fall in love with a girl ... at the ballet

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CHROMA, SERENADE AND EMERGENCE

Four Seasons Centre, Toronto

Serious ballet aficionados have been hearing the buzz about Wayne McGregor for years.

The British choreographer has become something of a rock star in the ballet world. McGregor is resident choreographer for the Royal Ballet and his most famous work, Chroma, created a sensation when it debuted in London in 2006.

So it's a big deal when the National Ballet of Canada's artistic director Karen Kain persuades this hotshot talent to set his hit on her company.

Chroma made its explosive Canadian premiere Wednesday evening, topping a triple bill that includes George Balanchine's Serenade and Crystal Pite's Emergence.

Chroma means absence of white, but John Pawson's glaring set is all white. It provides a stunning backdrop for 10 athletic dancers, who throw themselves into McGregor's daring and frenetic choreography with abandon. Dressed in androgynous nude and grey underwear, they twist, rotate and bend their bodies into seemingly impossible positions, creating stunning shapes in the process.

And since they don't wear pointe shoes or tights, every muscle protrudes from their toned legs. The choreography flatters the entire cast, and the leggy and hyper-flexible dancers Bridgett Zehr and Tanya Howard are standouts.

Joby Talbot's score, featuring rock tunes by the White Stripes along with his own original compositions, is radical and bold, and melds lyrical sounds with edgy rock. There's so much going in this 23-minute work that one may miss a few exhilarating moments of dazzling choreography.

But Chroma definitely knocked out the audience on this night, judging by the standing ovation that lasted several minutes. George Balanchine's Serenade, set to Tchaikovsky's magnificent Serenade for Strings in C Major, is the second work in the program. It was the first ballet the late Balanchine choreographed in the United States. And, 75 years after its premiere, it can still take your breath away.

The curtain rises on a tableau of women in romantic blue skirts. As the orchestra plays the first glorious chord, the women slowly extend their right arms around their heads -- a simple but unforgettable gesture.

The female corps de ballet must maintain perfect symmetry at all times and it rises to the challenge. The male and female leads land each jump and pirouette with softness and control. Stephanie Hutchinson looks every bit like a ballerina in a music box when she pivots gracefully en pointe in arabesque. And kudos to conductor David Briskin for drawing out every emotional note in the score.

Crystal Pite's creepy and original Emergence caps the night's program. The dancers slither and twitch like insects, emerging from brightness only to descend into a dark abyss. Precision is paramount in this fast-paced work and the large cast nails it. The men shine here especially.

Chroma, Serenade and Emergence make for a thrilling evening of dance.

- The National Ballet of Canada's mixed program continues at Toronto's Four Seasons Centre until Nov. 28.

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