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DANCE REVIEW | PARIS OPERA BALLET

Au Revoir to the Old, Bonjour to the New

By ROSLYN SULCAS

PARIS — Brigitte Lefèvre, director of the [Paris Opera Ballet](#), didn't let the grass grow under her feet when Wayne McGregor was appointed resident choreographer of the [Royal Ballet](#) in 2006. The next year Mr. McGregor created "Genus" for the French company, and the piece has been performed this month on a triple bill that ran at almost the same time as a Covent Garden program featuring Mr. McGregor's new "Limen."

Unlike the Royal Ballet, which teamed "Limen" with older works (Balanchine's "Agon" and Glen Tetley's "Sphinx"), the Paris troupe offered "Genus" alongside Benjamin Millepied's 2006 "Amoveo" and Nicolas Paul's new "Répliques." The difference in programming says a lot about the identities of the companies: the Royal Ballet tends to hedge its bets; the Paris Opera likes to throw down the gauntlet.

Not that "Amoveo," which opened the evening on Thursday, is a particularly challenging work. But it is a welcome offering from Mr. Millepied, a French-born principal dancer with [New York City Ballet](#), who tends to make well-crafted but sometimes mannered, sometimes predictable pieces.

"Amoveo," an insouciant roundelay for 11 dancers set to extracts from [Philip Glass](#)'s "Einstein on the Beach," throws off those constraints (together with pointe shoes). The result is a fluid, expansive dance that makes little overt use of a ballet vocabulary in its quick elisions between steps and jazzy motifs.

The ballet tells a kind of abstract love story, with the étoiles Nicolas Le Riche and Clairemarie Osta as a central pair amid a jaunty crowd that comes and goes around them with casual brio. At the heart of the work is a slow, intense pas de deux to Mr. Glass's "Bed (Aria)" that makes impressive use of Ms. Osta's quicksilver virtuosity and Mr. Le Riche's compelling lyricism and strength.

"Amoveo" gains much from its primary-color costumes (new for this production) and its backdrop, a large elevated screen that displays Mondrian-like continuously threading lines of color — both by [Paul Cox](#). The piece loses a little steam by the end, but it shows Mr. Millepied in an appealingly uninhibited mode.

"Répliques" is almost entirely opposite in tone. It is monochromatic in design, mood and movement, and the effect is both earnest and dreary. Mr. Paul, a soloist at the [Opera](#), didn't make life easy for himself by choosing a selection of rigorously unmelodic, rhythmically thorny music by Ligeti. And he doesn't illuminate it through the dancing, which frequently keeps its four couples facing one another in mirror-image groupings, as transparent scrimms gradually descend between them.

These scrimms (by the architect Paul Andreu), covered in wraithlike designs, are rather beautiful, and Mr. Paul occasionally achieves a certain visual resonance in his shadowy doubling of the dancers. (He writes an impressively intellectual essay in the excellent program; you imagine him reading Lacan during rehearsal breaks.) But this only goes so far in sustaining our interest, and it's not far enough.

You can't make the same complaint about Mr. McGregor's "Genus," which sustains a breathless tension from the outset as it puts an astounding succession of superb dancers through the extreme and complex

articulations that characterize his choreography. Whether or not you know that the work was inspired by Darwin's "Origin of Species," it's easy to see "Genus" as demonstrating the evolution of both the ballet body and ballet technique.

To see the 27 dancers — Marie-Agnès Gillot, Mathias Heymann, Dorothée Gilbert, Agnès Letestu among them — brilliantly negotiate Mr. McGregor's undulating curves of the torso, sweeping plunges into split-legged extensions and ever-surprising deviations from classical positions is to be elated by the sheer audacity of all concerned. (The vocabulary is deeply influenced by [William Forsythe](#)'s work but never looks imitative.)

"Genus" (currently seen on film in the [Frederick Wiseman](#) documentary "La Danse: The Paris Opera Ballet") is wildly ambitious in concept and execution. It has a vibrant electronic and acoustic score by Joby Talbot and Deru. It has imaginative lighting by Lucy Carter and video by Ravi Deepres — a rather extraneous changing desertcape, then flashing images of natural history samples (bones, butterflies) and documents. It has a tilted-box stage-within-a-stage décor and minimalist costumes, black leotards imprinted with ghostly X-ray images, both designed by Vicki Mortimer.

It may be a bit much. The structure of the work feels a little arbitrary. But the kinetic thrills and sensory overload of "Genus" leave you feeling that ballet, almost despite itself, is moving on.

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