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Miami City Ballet, Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris

By Laura Cappelle



Miami City Ballet performs 'The Four Temperaments'

It was quite a bet: a little-known ballet company from Florida touring Paris for three weeks in the middle of the summer. And yet Miami City Ballet is pulling off some of the most refreshing performances seen here in a while. With 14 ballets scheduled, it may be an unprecedented undertaking for the company's founder and director, former Balanchine star Edward Villella, but this tight-knit troupe has coped, and the audience's reaction to the unfamiliar repertoire has been rapturous.

Under Villella's guidance, Miami City Ballet has built a reputation for illuminating aspects of Balanchine's style often overlooked by others. The dancers' exuberance and faith in the steps are infectious, and theirs is an all-American musicality that sheds new light on ballets that have grown formulaic and dull on this side of the Atlantic.

Square Dance, one of their calling cards, sets the tone. At home in this whirlwind of spirited classical inventiveness and folk references, soloists and corps de ballet alike articulate the music and the choreography as one, striking notes so blissful that the action sometimes seems to stop for a millisecond. Similarly, their reading of *The Four Temperaments*, with its sharp contrast between soloists and assertive corps, greatly enriches the definition of each movement.

Two sisters, Jeanette and Patricia Delgado, captured the attention. Jeanette blazed through the exacting *Square Dance* with old-fashioned technical facility and a delightfully open upper body; Patricia showed more restraint but equal attention to form. The men may be less polished overall, but they bring real warmth to the stage, and even the exceedingly young Renato Penteado and Kleber Rebello showed stagecraft beyond their years.

The enthusiastic corps can't help revealing some rough edges, however, and it was a bold choice to include several of Balanchine's Imperial ballets, homages to the St Petersburg of his youth. Miami City Ballet can't approach the grand elegance Russian companies have lent these works in recent years, but they reminded us that they have American features, too. Their verve in the allegro sections of *Theme and Variations* (hampered by frightfully Disneyesque costumes and sets) and *Ballet Imperial*, in particular, brought the build-up to each ballet's climax into clear focus.

The handful of pieces by other choreographers served to highlight the dilemmas facing many US companies post-Balanchine. Christopher Wheeldon's *Liturgy*, a pas de deux created in 2003, is as austere in form as many Balanchine works, but the mystical, reflective atmosphere it projects points to a new sort of abstract drama. The least compelling offering was *Promethean Fire*, a Paul Taylor work created in the wake of 9/11, when emotions were running high. Set to a thunderous Bach score, it feels heavy-handed in its depiction of grief, despite sweeping, well-crafted patterns for the ensemble. With its grounded musicality, Taylor's style is not a natural fit for these dancers – better to see them in Balanchine, where they remain most at home.

★★★★☆

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