

Sarasota Ballet premieres new works

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Although there was no prescriptive thematic intention when Sarasota Ballet director Iain Webb commissioned three young choreographers to create world premieres for the opening program of the company's 32nd season, the trio of the ballets that debuted Friday night at the FSU Center for the Performing Arts coincidentally ended up exploring related motifs.

Principal dancer and resident choreographer Ricardo Graziano's "The Pilgrimage," junior principal Richard House's "Living Ghosts" and Brooklyn-based Gemma Bond's "Excursions" all represented journeys of sorts – whether of the body, the mind or the spirit. However, the distinctively different choreographic voices had variable results. The most successful was House's piece for five women and five men, set to selections from Italian composer Ludovico Einaudi's "Seven Days Walking" – an auditory chronicle of a week-long hike in the Alps that is soaring, lush and evocative. (Sadly, the live music that was to accompany all three pieces was sabotaged by the pianist's contraction of COVID just before dress rehearsal.)

Catalyzed by House's trip to a Surrealist art exhibition during the off-season in his native Australia, "Living Ghosts" explores the juncture between consciousness and dreams, relationships and solitude. The costumes, by Kat Chan were Fellini-esque, aiding in the evocation of an alternate consciousness. They ranged from dominatrix-like skimpy black pleather underwear with backless, geometrically cut-out tops for the women to unisex white pants with long white fringe in the third movement duet (the eternally alluring Danielle Brown in an unusual paring with character principal Ricki Bertoni), and barely-there layers of pale gauze in the moving final pas de deux (soloist Daniel Pratt and the very promising apprentice Hailey Stinchcomb).

Likewise, the choreography, which included both sharp arm movements with repeated weight shifts and (in the pas de deux) elegant, seamless fluidity enhanced the shift between mind and matter, showcasing the choreographer's ability to move from the pedestrian to the exceptional. This is the second House work I've viewed – the former member of the Australian Ballet has also created pieces for the ballet's studio company and conservatory trainees, as well as Key Chorale – and I predict his choreographic future may eclipse his dancing career.

Gemma Bond's "Excursions," set to the captivating music of American Samuel Barber's composition of the same name and selections from his Piano Sonata Op. 26, was a very different expedition, drawing its movement from real-world gesture and athleticism. The former dancer with the Royal Ballet and American Ballet Theatre has said she invited the dancers to create phrases based on descriptive words from reviews of Barber's work and the result is a delightful mish-



From left, Maximiliano Iglesias, Evan Gorbell and Luke Schaufuss in a scene from the world premiere of Gemma Bond's "Excursions" at The Sarasota Ballet. PROVIDED BY FRANK ATURA/THE SARASOTA BALLET

Sarasota Ballet – Premieres

New works by Richard House, Gemma Bond and Ricardo Graziano. Reviewed Oct. 21. Through Sunday. FSU Center for the Performing Arts, 5555 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota. Tickets start at \$35. 941-359-0099; sarasotaballet.org

mash of almost reckless activity.

With four principals and five soloist couples dressed by costume designer Lauren Starobin in bright pastels with a 1980's sportswear look (jumpsuits, short shifts and white socks over pointe shoes), it's a marathon of movement with some lovely quirky touches – as near the end when the dancers shoot straight up, like random kernels of popcorn.

The newest piece from Graziano – his tenth one-act for the company – evidenced his continuing prowess in conceiving complex and intricate patterns of movement that nevertheless seem organic. But this was not one of his most successful outings. That is largely attributable to his choice of music – Dmitri Shostakovich's Piano Trio Mo. 2 in E minor, Op. 67, a work that is so relentless in its harrowing tones, an audience member feels rather pummeled by its harshness.

Having covered this company for 12 years, I couldn't help but also think of its own journey to excellence under the direction of Iain Webb and his wife, artistic director Margaret Barbieri. Regardless of anyone's judgement of the artistic merits of these new works, it cannot be denied that the caliber of the dancing in each was outstanding.

The Sarasota Ballet is now a versatile and polished troupe that can hold its own artistically with the most elite companies in the country and I, for one, appreciate watching its dancers perform regardless of the choreography.

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