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Dance Review: Ballett Frankfurt

Ballett Frankfurt: **Final American Tour**  
June 4, 2004

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Jill Johnson and Regina van Berkel in *Duo*. Photo by Dominik Mentzos.

Ballett Frankfurt and its indecently gifted and inventive director William Forsythe have returned to the area (after a 15-year hiatus!) just long enough to say goodbye. After Saturday's performance at Zellerbach Hall, University of California, Berkeley, the company travels to UCLA, the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, and Paris' Théâtre National de Chaillot. Then, Ballett Frankfurt will close down and Forsythe will head his own new and smaller company, which will divide its time between Frankfurt and Dresden. Heaven knows when Forsythe will bring a troupe back to the West Coast again.

So, the time is now. Few choreographers over the past 20 years have sent shock waves through the international dance world, like the American-born Forsythe; few have been so blatantly imitated. The Cal Performances program happens to be a terrific assortment of mostly recent dances, all of them movement-based, and only in one case, are they accompanied by the ear-splitting sounds one has come to expect of modern ballet. As a matter of fact, the only music heard in much of the program Thursday (June 3) is generated by the dancers' own breathing and body-based cues; and the quiet is eerily stimulating. Although the three Forsythe pieces seen at the

San Francisco Ballet since 1987 have all been wonderful movement theater essays, and the dances incorporated by New York City Ballet (*Herman Schmerman, Behind the China Dogs*) have their admirers, the essence of this choreographer is more readily perceived in the dancing of his own 32-member company (the program remains the same through Saturday, but there will be some cast changes).

From the moment the curtain rose Thursday, one noticed how Forsythe has curtailed off the wing space, proposing a microcosm that separates the dancers from the outside world. Only in the female *Duo*, performed on the stage apron, is protocol broken. That fanciful exchange in which Jill Johnson and Natalie Thomas (in see-through tops, covering bare breasts) launch a series of combinations (unisons and canons) in imitation (the program notes tell us) of a clock (while piano music is heard almost subliminally) is followed by an endearing, if slightly overlong male quartet (*N.N.N.N.*). The eight-dancer *The Room As It Was* (the only piece in which women wear pointe shoes) opens the evening. The 14-dancer *One Flat Thing, reproduced* closes it.

And what a closer. From the back wall, the performers surge forward, pushing 20 square metal tables, over which and around which, they launch a series of fearless combinations, while Thom Willems' taped score sputters and roars. It's all a challenge, to restrict the spatial parameters in which dancers can function, but what emerges in this often ferocious work is the sense of design pervading these disparate encounters. Men twirl other men on the table tops and suddenly dip under the table. Women shoot extensions from the hip, winking at gravity. There is clatter, and as some performers pick themselves up and canter to the back of the stage, a feeling of ritual. At the end, the dancers pull back the tables and retreat into the darkness.

I believe it was Karole Armitage who dubbed one of her works *Drastic Classicism*, but the title more readily applies to Forsythe. A classical basis underlies the squiggles and kamikaze attacks at the heart of *The Room As It Was* (2002), a series of fractured encounters and solos in which bodies twist this way and that, while maintaining a tenuous hold on gravity. Flexed feet compete with opulently curved insteps. Dancers come and go for no logical reason, while one performer, Fabrice Mazliah, spends most of the performance lying on the floor. Duets are wary affairs, but the sexual tension one recalls from Forsythe's earliest dances, like *Love Songs (Old Records)*, is absent here.

The concern rather is with the infinite variety at the phrase level, and when a woman hoists and spins a man, it's the act, rather than the presumed implications of the act, to which we should respond. At the end, a rear scrim lifts and we see a couple arranged in a formal, family grouping; a burst of homey organ music arrives as contrast to the snapped fingers and body slaps that until then have furnished the musical cues. Thursday's performers included Johnson, Francesca Caroti, Dana Caspersen (the current Mrs. Forsythe), Jone San Martin, Stephen Galloway, Fabrice Mazliah, Richard Siegal and Ander Zabala.

The last joined Cyril Baldy, Amancio Gonzalez and Georg Reischl for (*N.N.N.N.*), the title reportedly prompted by the visual image of the backs of four men in a row, arms linked. What seems at first an act of deconstruction - the men individually scrutinize their arms and their connection to their torsos - evolves into a great act of accumulative material, pervaded by a tone of casual camaraderie. The timing is razor sharp - these fellows seem to be communicating with their elbows. And by the time they fall into a chorus line, you find it hard to stifle a small cheer.



Ander Zabala, Georg Reischl, Cyril Baldy and Amancio Gonzalez of Ballet Frankfurt in *(N.N.N.N.)*. Photo by Joris-Jan Bos.

*Ballett Frankfurt dances at 8 p.m., Friday and Saturday at Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley. For tickets, call (510) 642-9988.*

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\*Disclaimer: The views of Allan Ulrich are not necessarily the views of Voice of Dance\*

