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 Festival Ballet's  
emotional, sensual  
Carmen

# Festival Ballet's latest 'up CLOSE on HOPE'

**Natural grace**

 By **BILL RODRIGUEZ** | March 24, 2011

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Watching a ballet or modern dance from eighth row center is a pretty privileged experience, but an "up CLOSE on HOPE" performance makes that seem like peanut gallery seating. Festival Ballet Providence is presenting nine company premieres through March 27 in their intimate Black Box Theater.

Studio rehearsal proximity, no more than four rows from the dancers, immerses audiences in the performances. On this occasion, which includes three world premieres, the visual plunge is especially rewarding.

The dances build to "Surrender," the last and longest piece (22 minutes). Choreographed by Viktor Plotnikov, the bold work will be performed in April at the Belgrade Dance Festival, where Festival Ballet artistic director Mihailo Djuric will be receiving an award. The showcase work, featuring Vilia Putrius and Mindaugas Bauzys, includes a 10-minute selection that premiered last season, to which a prelude and ending have been added. Plotnikov, a Boston Ballet soloist, has created numerous dances for Festival Ballet over the years, and this one ranks among his most inventive. The most available dynamic between a male and a female dancer in a piece is emotional and sexual tension, and in "Surrender" that is given physicality. Long shoulder-to-ankle lengths of red or white cloth stretch across the performance space, constraining the dancers in various ways.

A man and a woman are held back as they reach toward each other; two women move across the stage in the background, one walking backward, sharing a taut white cloth. There is a narrative thread as well; at one point Bauzys portrays an emotionally inert man immobile in a push-up position as several women move through the space beneath him. Continuing that metaphor, when his character softens at the end and he and Putrius fling themselves at each other, they fail to touch.

There are four pas de deux among the selections, two of which distinguish themselves by being lighthearted. In Leticia Guerrero's "Encuentro a Solas," Lauren Menger and Henry Montilla are romantically playful. August Bournonville's "La Sylphide" is an outright frolic, as Putrius and Alexander Akulov take turns performing classic ballet movements. That traditional form of exchange is done with particularly impressive technique in Vasily Vainonen's "Flames of Paris," as Walter Gutierrez is especially strong and precise in his leaps and turns, and Alexandria Mitchell seems delightfully inspired to match him.

Karin Tremblay's "Etching" distinguishes itself as the most imaginative and perhaps most beautiful duet, as Kirsten Evans and Ian Matysiak execute lyrical variations on getting in and out of each other's arms. Of similar focus and intensity is Colleen Cavanaugh's "Tanz," to an excerpt from Carl Orff's *Camina Burana*. Sprightly and saucily danced by Lauren Kennedy the night I attended, it was bursting with celebratory energy.

The opening work, "Moving Forward," by company member Mark Harootian, also contains many duets as well as threesomes, largely featuring Mitchell. The music, by Boccherini and Mozart, is especially in tune with the movements, from the staccato violin opening to the percussively strummed mandolin toward the end, which contrasts so effectively with the graceful interplay of the ensemble.

Most of the contemporary dance pieces are balletic, but the one that strays does so to a droll, otherworldly extent. Tess Bernard's "The Questioners" presents a row of skulking aliens, in various outlandish helmet masks by Big Nazo, who gradually grow less fearful and awkward in their motions as they lurch around and explore. The conclusion is optimistic and the overall effect delightful.

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Also humorous, in concept rather than its lovely execution, is Vilja Putrius's "Dreamer." It's framed by a man in street clothes ( Ilya Burov) sitting in a chair, reading at the beginning and waking up at the end. At first his solo consists of striking abstract poses, but soon a blonde dancer joins him, then two more, until eight women are dancing with him. A tasteful pas de neuf to Ravel's *Bohème* is enjoyed by all.

For the first time at Festival Ballet Providence, the majority of choreographers for an "up CLOSE on HOPE" evening are female. How appropriate for an art form, long dominated by men, that has always drawn inspiration from and relied upon the natural grace of women.

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