

Jorma Elo / *1st Flash*
 Alejandro Cerrudo /
Silent Ghost
 Cayetano Soto /
Huma Rojo

There is nothing quite like knowing, within the first seconds of a performance, that you are in the presence of vital dancers doing equally vital choreography — a combination often missing in the world of contemporary dance, and particularly contemporary ballet. The secret for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet lies in the company's ability to find choreographers who know how to take the dancers' rigorous classical training and technique as the gift it is and add exciting new language to it, rather than asking them to forget everything they've taken years to learn or to simply trod the same old pathways.

For its first trip to Victoria, B.C., in November, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet brought the

program it developed last year for its 20th anniversary season: three pieces, all by European men, two of them commissioned from young dancemakers in their 30s. The first and best piece — simply because it was the most surprising — was one of the few the company has bought from the older Jorma Elo, a sought-after Finnish choreographer whose influence could clearly be seen in the other two works.

Elo's *1st Flash* premiered at Nederlands Dance Theater in 2003. It begins in silence, but we soon hear the first notes of the second movement of Jean Sibelius' *Violin Concerto in D minor*. This lyrical, yearning, technically difficult piece of music sets up expectations that any dance set to it will also be lyrical, yearning and technically difficult. And this one is, sort of — and that's where the first surprise is. Instead of following the mood and beats established by Sibelius, Elo mostly works against them, so the movement is often lyrical, yet not always pretty, and only

occasionally *on* the music. It's also far more buoyant than yearning (dancers occasionally hop like bunnies), technically difficult and highly athletic.

The six dancers, wonderfully precise with hands and feet, and with the very specific direction of legs and arms, are so grounded in classical ballet that the second surprise is how well Elo's oddities, jokes and deliberate awkwardness — fluttering fingers, stiff, staccato arm movements, those hopping bunnies — work on their bodies. Instead of looking grafted on, they seemed organic, which serves, in turn, to make Sibelius' century-old music feel ultra-modern, even futuristic. By the time the piece ends, in silence again, with one flash of brilliant light, the dancers have delivered languorous lifts and perfect arabesques, alternated with startlingly fast spins, body rolls and twitches verging on the manic. Yet it all somehow makes a satisfying whole. Not telling a story, but *being* a story about movement and about how bodies, dancing alone, in couples and as a group, can create shapes, emotions and even a new way of hearing old music.

The lightning-fast speed favoured by Elo appears again almost immediately in Spaniard Alejandro Cerrudo's *Silent Ghost*, with men executing spins as fast as any break dancer. The brief references to hip hop and other current dance forms continue to weave throughout the piece, which, unlike *1st Flash*, definitely is about yearning — yearning for love and for lost loves.

In contrast to Elo, Cerrudo takes music from a variety of contemporary indie-rock and electronica artists, including King Creosote and Jon Hopkins, Ólafur Arnalds and Dustin Hamman, and uses that music as it sounds, sombre and rhythmic. Death

lurks behind each exquisite duet (male-female, female-female and male-male, none of them erotic, but deeply intimate and tender) and even behind the impeccable unison dancing that feels both joyous and melancholy at the same time. But death is quiet enough throughout this piece never to show itself clearly: *Silent Ghost* is serious, but not morose. It does not set out to make you cry, but you just might anyway. The move that got me was a humble one, repeated several times, where one dancer created a circle with her arms (the simple and familiar first position), and her partner dipped his head down and into that circle. She then reached her head down to touch his.

Huma Rojo by another Spaniard, Cayetano Soto, was a completely different kettle of fish, yet still grounded in Elo-style precision and eccentricity. Set to jaunty music by Latin and American jazz luminaries such as Xavier Cugat, Nat King Cole and Ray Barretto, whose infectiously silly *El Watusi* set the tone from the top, *Huma Rojo* (Red Smoke) delivered a bright, light close to the evening. After a voice-over announced that the key to dating success is a big ego, the eight indefatigable dancers — men and women identically dressed in 1960-ish suave red turtlenecks and trousers — strutted, sashayed, wiggled and preened to crowd-pleasing effect.

Throughout all three pieces, lighting was a palpable presence. The eerily beautiful lighting for *1st Flash* was by Jordan Tuinman; Michael Korsch created the mysterious, shadowy world of *Silent Ghost*; Seah Johnson was responsible for *Huma Rojo's* vigorous stripes.

— ROBIN J. MILLER

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet



Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's Katherine Bolaños in Jorma Elo's *1st Flash*
 Photo: Sharen Bradford