

Friday, November 13, 2009

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Sokvannara Sar: Lighting Up the House With Mopey

Sokvannara Sar at Vail International Dance Festival,
Philip Glass at the piano (photo © Erin Baiano)



It's not stressful *enough* that this corps member was making his debut in a 15-minute solo? Try not knowing until 7:13 whether the performance was going to be canceled due to a power outage.

When I got to McCaw Hall at 7:10 pm, the building was dark and a bundled-up crowd stood outside in a ghostly smudge of light provided by a huge (stage?) light. A forced outage by the City had turned off power to other Seattle Center buildings as well in the early afternoon, including PNB's Phelps Center and the garage across the street.

Lights had been promised for 6 pm. Here it was 7:10. I heard from a PNB staff member that if the lights didn't come on by 7:15 the show would be postponed until Sunday. (The hall does have emergency generators, but apparently they are not sufficient to alleviate concerns about the dancers' safety.)

No worries, though. At 7:13—two minutes before the big announcement—the lights went on.



While the ushers prepped the lobby, a young man circulated outside with the Will Call tickets box, and I went to buy my ticket at the Phelps Center box office. How cute: it was a handwritten note on Jonathan Porretta stationery. (Seattle has some amazing box office folks: lucky for PNB some of the best were on duty last night. That woman with the long, dark hair can make the most complicated ticket exchange without a blink of the eye; it would take more than a power outage to make her skip a beat.)

The curtain did eventually go up, around 8, with a short curtain speech by Boal mentioning the "heroes backstage pulling things together" on such short notice and asking folks to remember to turn off "cellphones, flashlights, and generators."

What dragged my tired body out of my warm home into the cold, possibly performance-free night, was the thought that this was my one and only chance to see "Sy" (Sokvannara Sar) dance "Mopey." I'm so glad I went! This corps member turned in a prime performance, one made all the more wonderful when you consider that this is not a sparkling short combination but a piece where the dancer needs to hold the audience's attention for a quarter of an hour. Worse, during the quietest periods, his back is to the audience.

Sar starts the piece out *fast*. In the hoodie portion of the piece, he's a teenage ninja, moving here, there, everywhere...fast.

Later, he starts differentiating between the highs and the lows. He looks suspended in some movements, so stretched up it's as though he's hanging onto a hidden cable. In others, he doesn't just bend his knee; there's a softening somewhere—maybe the hip?—that makes the lows very low.

Parts of his Mopey are pedestrian, hip, thrown off. Others are super-specific, clear, and intentional. For example, in the "Frankenstein" step, where Mopey goes stiff, pulls up a monster hand, goes flat-footed, and leans back, you can see Sar's toes twang up from the stage...and you can see the reverberation throughout his board-like body.

Sar easily handled the varying moods and modes of this work. The stiff, the floppy, the tendus, the sound-effect slicing... He brought lyricism to new places: we saw it not so much in the arabesques, and certainly in the swooping bird arms in the beginning as the other three Mopeys have danced it, but also in the nipple and belly-button circles toward the end.

I went to Sar's "Mopey" expecting wildness. He so often dances with an intensity and energy that justifies such an expectation. But how smart to save the wildness for the final sequence of the piece! Here he seemed to be simultaneously in control and out of control, flirting with life's crazier, darker forces.

Four Mopeys, four such different interpretations! I suppose you could plot them, with psychological emphasis on one axis and dance/movement on the other. But more interesting is to think about what this piece would look like on a woman. (Good God, that would mean we'd have to go 5 times, because, who, really, are you going to skip?) But to see Rachel Foster do it...I'd brave another dark November weeknight to see that!