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New York Theatre Ballet Shines at Jacob's Pillow

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New York Theatre Ballet performing in Antony Tudor's *Dark Elegies* at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival.
Photo by Cherylynn Tsushima.

BECKET — In a program titled “Legends & Visionaries,” New York Theatre Ballet performs Antony Tudor’s 1937 “Dark Elegies” and “Song Before Spring,” co-choreographed this year by Zhong-Jing Fang and Steven Melendez. One of the many things this chamber-size company does is offer fun-filled, pint-size versions of story ballets such as “The Nutcracker.” But when it comes to presenting masterworks such as “Dark Elegies,” the dancers are dead serious: At Wednesday’s opening night performance at Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, they killed it. (In the very, very good way.)

For their “Song Before Spring,” like many contemporary choreographers, Fang and Melendez (who is also one of the company’s engaging dancers) were drawn to Philip Glass. Josh Quillen's arrangement of the composer’s “Piano Etudes, Nos. 1-10” is played live by New York University’s Steel Drum Ensemble while eight dancers perform a series of overlapping sequences filled with well-constructed phrases and evocative

entrances and exits. The dancers are nicely trained technicians, so the abundant ballet vocabulary here is clean and generously executed. They falter slightly in transitions between parallel and turned-out steps — the movements sometimes losing clarity — and in the few places where absolute unison is required.

Handsomely costumed by Sylvia Taalson Nolan, the three men wear suits, the women A-line dresses; over time, the females change into sleeker dresses, the males into brighter-toned shirts, as if they've transitioned from the workday to an after-hours party. There is a pleasing enigma to these characters, whose relationships to one another are mysterious yet collegial. Comforting motifs pepper the work: A dancer will slump a head onto another's shoulder or be lifted and cradled. An extended pas de deux between Joshua Andino-Nieto and Daniel Salas is filled with a big, acrobatic physicality rendered with a gorgeously unexpected softness. In contrast, Elena Zahlmann's long solo is passionate, propulsive.

At first the playfulness of the instrumentation is refreshing, but eventually the ascending circularity of Glass's composition plateaus. Meanwhile the choreographers seem to doubt their instincts. When a story line starts to force itself on us, the dance meanders before dissipating.

Though "Dark Elegies" is a jewel, a miracle of construction and tone, presenting it isn't easy. Set to the Gustav Mahler/Friedrich Rückert song cycle "Kindertotenlieder," the ballet depicts a small community grieving the deaths of its children. Between the subject matter and the stark, stylized drama of the movement vocabulary, "Elegies" can be histrionic if performed ineptly. Fortunately artistic director Diana Byer, who studied with Tudor, and Tudor expert Donald Mahler, who staged this production for the company, are sensitive curators.

Tudor in no way provided a happy ending here — indeed, he labeled the scenes "Laments of the Bereaved" and "The Resignation" — but instead offered heartbreaking poetry.

In Raymond Sovey's somber, peasant-like costumes (after Nadia Benois's beautifully austere original designs), a "Chorus" of six frames, witnesses, or joins in the series of three solos and one duet. Mayu Oguri and Zahlmann are the standouts among the soloists, each exquisitely balancing Tudor's consummate union of simplicity and drama. But all the dancers shine here, precisely by dimming their individual lusters.

This production is accompanied "only" by pianist Michael Scales and baritone Darren Chase. How I wish all performances of "Elegies" would follow this model and throw out the grandiose orchestrated version of the Mahler. Scales and Chase, with a melancholy at once plaintive and sumptuous, allow us to hear the magnificent, deafening silences of loss and to see Tudor's open-eyed and -hearted hymn of life and death.