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Review: New York Theater Ballet Is at Home in St. Mark's Church, Part of Danspace Project

By Siobhan Burke

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New York Theater Ballet dancers performing “Cat’s Cradle” in St. Mark’s Church for Danspace Project. Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

It’s been almost a year since New York Theater Ballet moved downtown to St. Mark’s Church, from its former headquarters in Murray Hill. Its current season, “Legends & Visionaries 2015,” part of Danspace Project’s Dance: Access series, is its first in the church sanctuary. On Thursday, the troupe seemed right at home amid the pillars and stained glass windows, looking radiant and grounded despite the past year’s upheaval. The move felt complete.

The program reflected this spirit of new beginnings with two world premieres — by the American Ballet Theater dancer Gemma Bond and the percussive experimentalist David Parker — along with the company premiere of Richard Alston’s “Such Longing” (2005), sensitively restaged by Martin Lawrance. These were bookended by two pieces of 1930s British repertory: Frederick Ashton’s “Capriol Suite” (1930) and Antony Tudor’s “Dark Elegies” (1937).

Ms. Bond’s “Cat’s Cradle,” for six women and two men, opens up possibilities through constraints. Lengths of white fabric, looped around the dancers’ waists (Ms. Bond’s handiwork), connect them in chains of two and three. The material doubles as costume and set, as the groups — independently or all together — eddy through trellis-like formations to Karen LeFrak’s voluptuous score. One stretch may create a barrier to be ducked under; another may rein in a rogue dancer. Though her cast is still working out the kinks, Ms. Bond showed that she’s up for a challenge of both choreography and design.

Mr. Parker, too, gave himself a choreographic riddle, exploring tap dance on pointe. His whirlwind “Two Timing,” based on Steve Reich’s “Clapping Music” score, is a rhythmic conversation between Elena Zahlmann, in purple pointe shoes, and the guest artist Jeffrey Kazin. As Mr. Kazin claps a 12-count pattern, Ms. Zahlmann echoes it with the tips of her shoes. Increasingly tricky, playful feats of body percussion — she drums on his torso, he slaps the ground — emerge as they phase out of and back into unison.

The members of Theater Ballet are not only refined dancers but also unaffected actors. This came through in “Such Longing,” a stirring rumination on companionship to Chopin, played live by the pianist Michael Scales. (Mr. Alston, in creating the work, was thinking about Chopin’s exile from Poland.) Steven Melendez began alone in serene solitude, soon joined by Choong Hoon Lee, Amanda Treiber and Rie Ogura for sprightlier, more passionate vignettes.

“Capriol Suite” and “Dark Elegies” showed other facets of the troupe’s dramatic gifts: Whether portraying boisterous 16th-century courtiers (“Capriol”) or a grieving society (“Elegies”), they draw you in. The intimacy of the space only helped; the amplitude and honesty of their dancing has found its match in St. Mark’s Church.

New York Theater Ballet continues performances through Saturday at Danspace Project, St. Mark’s Church, Manhattan; 866-811-4111, danspaceproject.org.

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