

MOVING IN PARTS

Steel Ballerina

Created by Mel Dodge, Pagan Dorgan and Jacqueline Coates
Presented by BRAVE

at TAPAC Theatre, Western Springs, Auckland
From 4 Oct 2009 to 5 Oct 2009

Reviewed by Natalie Dowd, 5 Oct 2009 (www.theatreview.org.nz)

At the time most ballerinas would have packed their Pointe shoes away for less gruelling pursuits Margot Fonteyn joined with Rudolph Nureyev to become one of the most electric partnerships of all time, and as the extensive programme notes tell us, performed for another seventeen years.

In *Steel Ballerina*, Mel Dodge and Pagan Dorgan, with director Jacqueline Coats, explore expiry dates, the public and private persona of the legend, and the magic of performing through a mix of theatre and dance.

It is clear that extensive research has taken place, and their bibliography is referenced in the programme, along with a timeline of Fonteyn's life. Her story is one that easily parallels that of a great romantic ballet.

Steel Ballerina begins to the sound of a train. The mood is pensive, reflective, uncertain, and I assume the worried looking figure sitting alone in a white dress is the public Fonteyn (Dodge), later joined by Dorgan: the inner woman, or spirit of the dancer. The duet to Bjork and Thom Yorke's *I've seen it all* that follows is characterised by hands touching and interchanging, the 'spirit' leaning. The tiny 'nudge' gesture by Dodge as Fonteyn makes me wonder if this section is an expression of inner conflict, perhaps at her proposed retirement?

Dodge subsequently becomes Anna, Fonteyn's real life care-giver, but developed as a "character from a book" in the piece. Fact and fiction become intertwined as the journey back into Fonteyn's life begins, starting with the onset of her fatal illness.

It is confusing at times, and takes a bit of work to follow the 'story' as Dodge goes from Anna to Fonteyn, to Nureyev and back to Anna again but she transitions well and captures the accents and mannerisms beautifully.

As Anna implores the hospital staff to give Fonteyn a pseudonym, and tells us the story of how the audience shred their programmes and throw them during a twenty minute curtain call, it's like 'being there'. The desire to have been in that crowd tugs at my heartstrings, as does the haunting mystical soaring music of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*.

The intersection of dance with drama and narrative in this piece is aided by the well thought out and executed sound design by Sebastian Morgan-Lynch. A wide range of music is employed reflecting different aspects of Fonteyn's life, from performer to wife of a Panamanian diplomat, to woman of resolve. The imitation of Nureyev's 'voice' at pertinent times and snippets of character quirks add humour as the relationship between Fonteyn and Nureyev is explored at the table over cups of tea.

Dorgan wisely uses elegant contemporary vocabulary with a ballet touch, rather than attempting to emulate Fonteyn's spirit in classical form. The white tunic over long sleeved leotard top and tights with ballet shoes is an effective costume and the tutu remains a prop, spilling out of an old suitcase. I wonder if the very short length of tunic and often showing of the 'boy shorts' allude to the *danseur* as well as ballerina, since Dorgan also becomes Nureyev in part.

The dramatic representation of the pressures and rigorous schedules of Fonteyn's life expressed through repetition is just one instance where Corinne Simpson's lighting design also aids the transition from narrative to dance and brings to life the magic of performance throughout. The interchanging of warm to cool white fluorescence accentuates Dorgan's embodiment of excruciating pain and exhaustion and portrayal of steely spirit.

Rather than an exact action replay of her life, a conveyance of Fonteyn's essence appears to be the goal. Although a mammoth task, there are moments where this is achieved and in parts this work is very moving, including the final 'floor barre' before the "magnetic indefinable porcelain" magic dancer is laid to rest in ethereal light and drifting paper.