
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

September 24, 2009

Soaring ballet, earthy modern dance of 'Come Fly With Me' is quite inventive

Couples who stay home and listen to their old Frank Sinatra records apparently don't hold much interest for choreographer Twyla Tharp. She is much more concerned with lovers who go out at night, dance with strangers and live on the very edge of danger, temptation and desire.

At least that's the case with "Come Fly With Me," Tharp's dazzling new work set to the voice of Sinatra and performed in a blaze of passion and heat by an ensemble of thoroughbred dancers. Conceived, choreographed and directed by Tharp, the Alliance Theatre world premiere is backed by an onstage orchestra and dressed up in the visual eye-candy of some of Broadway's best designers. There's even a jazz vocalist (Dee Daniels) who croons about the lilting highs and low-down dirty blues of falling in love.

You might quibble with the choppy mood swings or familiar romantic themes of "Come Fly With Me," a show with Broadway ambitions by the modern-dance maven who created the commercially successful Billy Joel homage "Movin' Out." Tharp's Sinatra celebration — a series of vignettes about four couples who come together under the skylight of an opulent ballroom — isn't entirely seamless and at times feels a bit random.

But you can't question the inventiveness and vitality of Tharp's choreography — a quirky-sophisticated amalgamation of soaring ballet and earthy modern form — or the powerhouse technique of her superb performers. I have never seen a more charismatic, more expressive group of dancers in my life.

"Come Fly With Me" is situated in a glittering ballroom, designed by James Youmans, that recalls the glory days of New York's Rainbow Room. The band sits in front of a dramatic curtain that, according to the sentiments of the moment, is transformed from dusty blue to hot red, thanks to the sumptuous lighting of Donald Holder.

The night begins with a solo by Charlie Neshyba-Hodges, the bald and diminutive club waiter, who will soon find his pixie-ish soulmate in Laura Mead, dressed in a pretty pink dress and ankle-length boots. He is shy. She is willing. Together they triumph over his comedic pratfalls, tight red underpants and fickle bow-tie.

As it turns out here, the women are just as strong as the men.

Holley Farmer, looking statuesque in a slinky blue dress and spikey red hair, catches the eye of Matthew Dibble, much to the vexation of her love interest (showoff John Selya). The tall and slinky Karine Plantadit plays an underwear-revealing vixen who struts like a tigress on the prowl. In the dark and troubling "That's Life" interlude, she is pummeled by her lover (Keith Roberts), but she is not to be undone. Plantadit owns the show.

Selya's solo to "The September of My Years" is a meditation on loss, yearning and regret. Like Sinatra in his mature years, here is a man cracked and tested by time. The barrel chested Selya is not a small man, but he is astonishingly agile and athletic — the dominant male dancer of the group. In the subtle and intelligent "Witchcraft," Farmer ignores a pair of ghost-like figures in black who try to distract her, but with a cock of her head, she acknowledges their presence and falls under their spell.

By Act Two, the club-goers have boozed it up, lost all sense of decorum and proceed to strip down to basics. To great erotic effect, Katherine Roth's beautiful silk dresses and tops get wrung out, tied back and twisted into mere strings.

Tharp may not be the sharpest storyteller, and there is something slightly disconcerting about hearing Sinatra's vocal stripped of their musical accompaniment, then re-sung to the sounds of a live band. But Tharp has an amazing eye for detail. Even the lampshades, bowties and bra strings are choreographed with humor and precision.

"Come Fly With Me" is a mesmerizing evening of the theater and, no doubt about it, the most important show of the Atlanta season.