Cultural Daily

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More Air Than Fire in McNally's Diaghilev Play

David Sheward · Thursday, February 1st, 2018

"Does my enthusiasm exhaust you?" exclaims Douglas Hodges as Serge Diaghilev in Terrence McNally's new play *Fire and Air* about the volatile Russian impresario, his relationships with his star dancers Nijinsky and Massine, and his revolutionary company Ballets Russes. Hodges' virtuoso turn is indeed exhausting. Every intonation, gesture, and movement expresses the fiery temperament of the implacable visionary who set the stage for some of the greatest works in dance history. But the performance and John Doyle's fast-paced staging aren't enough to pull together McNally's unfocused script and provide a clear, dynamic picture of a genius and his explosive impact on 20th century culture.

Douglas Hodge and James Cusati-Moyer in *Fire and Air*.
Credit: Joan Marcus

Glancing through the program notes by Sophie Andreassi for the Classic Stage Company world premiere production and the jam-packed historical timeline, it's easy to see McNally's problem. There is so much material and potential themes to choose from that it's difficult to imagine them being contained in one evening. So McNally includes too much. There's Diaghilev's obsessive sexual and romantic passion for Nijinsky, the greatest dancer of the modern era; the shift in artistic taste from classical to contemporary; Diaghilev's dysfunctional relationship with his mother country Russia and his neurotic narcissism; the arc of Ballet Russes and its influence on performance; Nijinsky's madness and the ambition of his successor Massine; and on and on. McNally attempts to cover all of these and short-changes them as a result.

Even with this kitchen-sink approach, many fascinating and vital elements are left out or minimized. Nijinsky is a minor player and Massine an afterthought, and a little thing like the Russian Revolution and how it affects the expatriate characters is barely mentioned.

An additional hurtle is the nature of the subject: dance. Rather than showing the exquisite movement of such signature groundbreaking Ballet Russes pieces as *Afternoon of a Faun, Spectre de la Rose,* and *The Rite of Spring*, McNally has Diaghilev describe them as Nijinsky (the sublimely beautiful James Cusati-Moyer) is enacting them offstage.

Marin Mazzie, Douglas Hodge, John Glover (background), and Marsha Mason in *Fire and Air*.
Credit: Joan Marcus

The play travels like an out-of-control locomotive from the company's inception in 1909 to Diagheliv's death in 1929, barely stopping at a variety of European cities. Aside form Jane Cox's atmospheric lighting, the only way we know where we are is through expositional dialogue such as "Welcome to Monte Carlo," "Here we are in Venice," and "We're on our way to Athens."

As noted, Hodge delivers an over-the-top whirlwind of a performance as the temperamental producer. Cusati-Moyer as Nijinsky and Jay Armstrong Johnson as Massine exhibit exquisite dance technique, but are not given much of a chance to explore the psyches of these gods of Terpsichore. John Glover lends a world-weary elegance and deep sorrow to Dima, Diaghhilev's business manager who also has a crush on him. Marsha Mason makes a lovable, motherly nanny and Marin Mazzie is stylish and arch as a wealthy patron, but her role doesn't require much beyond feeding lines to Hodge. This is a potentially fascinating subject, but there's more air than fire here.

Feb. 1—25. Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St., NYC. Tue—Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 3pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours including intermission. $61. (212) 677-4210. www.classicstage.org.

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