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American Contemporary Ballet Celebrates Romance and Hollywood Glamour in Tribute to Astaire

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, February 5th, 2020

If you're looking for an escape to a simpler, more elegant time where romance and glamour went hand in glove, you're in for a treat with **Astaire Dances III** at the Metropolis in DTLA. But you'll need to act quickly, because this limited engagement ends February 16th. For the 3rd year in a row, Lincoln Jones, artistic director of American Contemporary Ballet, recreates signature dances, replicating the choreography step-for-step, from a handful of beloved films from the 1950's starring Fred Astaire, who danced alongside some of Hollywood's most accomplished leading ladies.

If you have an aversion to classical ballet, fear not. While the members of this company have their training in classical ballet, the Astaire Dances program requires a completely different set of skills. And that's precisely what appeals to Jones who felt that this style of dance frees his dancers of the heavy requirements of technique and athleticism associated with ballet and enables them to focus on the more musical elements of dance like phrasing, rhythm and relating to one's partner. Jones describes himself as something of a late bloomer when it comes to Fred Astaire, whom he first discovered in his 30s. He describes the experience as revelatory. Prior to this point, Jones' focus had been on George Balanchine, who is considered the father of modern ballet and something of an innovator in his day.

Joshua Brown and Rochelle Chang recreate the dance made famous by Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse in the film "Silk Stockings." Photo by Mary Joyce.

The overall production was exceedingly well conceived and executed, from the downtown loft venue which provides a modern yet urban canvas for the talented dance corps to the simple yet evocative lighting design, the exquisite costumes and last but certainly not least, the 9-piece chamber orchestra fronted by a singer, each of which blends together seamlessly to create a nostalgic love letter to Astaire's artistry. Jones acknowledges that recreating these dance numbers, while a labor of love, is a painstaking process that goes well beyond the steps. "We look for everything. The tilt of the head, the way the hand is held. The exact moment the dress is held up. That's where the magic is. I found with Astaire, that if you don't do it exactly like they did it, it doesn't work."

In an effort to emulate the nightclub experience from this era, Jones begins the show with an unexpected twist – a comedian. While the comedian's material seemed a bit off-color and

incongruous, some of the jokes landed while others fell a bit flat. But I admired the effort, which in retrospect, reminded me of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. The dance program began with three solos, which featured original choreography by Lincoln Jones accompanied by a live drummer. It's a novel idea which found its inspiration in Astaire's work which incorporated dance routines against a percussive rhythm. The solos are performed by Michelle DeAngelis, Madeline Houk and Rochelle Chang. All three performers were exceptional, with Ms. Houk emerging as the frontrunner for her exquisite extensions and intricate footwork.

Joshua Brown and Sarah Bukowski trip the light fantastic (in silhouette) in Astaire Dances III. Photo by Sam Muller.

As entertaining and impressive as the solos were, they felt more like an appetizer for the main course, five delightful and quintessentially Astaire partnered dance numbers from classic films which included *The Gay Divorcée, Daddy Long Legs, Shall We Dance, Let's Dance* and *Silk Stockings*. Backed by a first-rate 9-piece band, Anastasia Malliaras served up silky period vocals with classic Cole Porter and Gershwin tunes like "Night and Day" and "They Can't Take that Away from Me" with style and panache as a prelude to each dance. Principal dancer Joshua Brown takes on the role of Fred Astaire and is partnered with different women for each of the 5 numbers. Brown distinguishes himself as perfectly adept at projecting the effortless charm of Astaire.

Jones acknowledged that this style of dance was entirely new for Joshua Brown, who had to learn everything in a matter of weeks. As artistic director Jones explains, "Astaire was an utter gentleman. Josh has a natural chivalry and deference" which served these numbers well. "Ballet puts this incredible emphasis on codified sculptural lines, so giving in to the ease was more of a challenge." The women were exceptional in their own right, taking on the dances immortalized by Ginger Rogers, Cyd Charisse and Leslie Caron. And as has been said of Ginger Rogers, the women matched their partner's ability with grace and aplomb while doing it backwards and in heels. Tickets can be purchased at ACBdances.com or by phone at (213) 304-3408.

(Featured photo credit: Sam Muller)

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