Dance review: Sarasota Ballet makes triumphant debut at Jacob’s Pillow

The acclaimed and versatile Sarasota Ballet makes its debut at Jacob’s Pillow, the summer dance mecca in the Berkshires.

The Florida-based Sarasota Ballet made its Jacob’s Pillow debut on Wednesday night in a well-planned program that aimed to introduce this small but mighty troupe to New England.

Now celebrating its 25th season, the company numbers 56 dancers and has made an outsize impression for its ambitions and achievements. Twenty-four dancers made the trip to perform in the Berkshires. Under the direction of former Royal Ballet (of England) dancers, Iain Webb and his wife, the famed ballerina, Margaret Barbieri, the organization is noted for carefully coached and mounted productions by the legendary 20th century choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton and others, including George Balanchine and Agnes de Mille.

Webb and Barbieri have also fostered young talent. One of their dancers, the Brazilian-born Ricardo Graziano, is not only performing this week but has also created the world premiere, “In a State of Weightlessness,” set to a score by Philip Glass. The program offered three works that represent various corners of the dance world, past and present. The evening opened with a pretty work, “The American,” by hot, international choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, who is not only well known for his ballets on multiple companies, but also for his hit musical, “An American in Paris,” currently on Broadway. “The American” starts with five couples, the women in buoyant dresses and point shoes swooping around the stage, well supported by their gracious partners. A sixth couple performs a pas de deux that centers the work, one of the most beautiful passages of recent memory. A melting Danielle Brown is carried and turned in every possible manner by Ricardo Rhodes who holds her horizontal across his shoulders as well as lifting her high above his head. The slow-motion and mesmerizing segment is followed by a sprightly allegro ending, led by the adorable Nicole Padilla and Juan Gil.

Ashton’s modernist pair of works, “Monotones I” and “Monotones II,” dating from 1966 and 1965, were next performed by a trio of dancers: two women and one man for the first, and two men and one woman in the second. They are set to two pieces by the composer, Erik Satie: “Gnossiennes No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3” and “Gymnopedies No. 1, No. 2, and No.3.” The dancers are dressed in unisex leotards and tights, capped by rounded headpieces that make them look like moon-children moving in a daze or a dream. Ashton emphasized the slow, careful pacing of the music by matching movements in a hypnotic rhythm with gestures of hands curled or carefully laid out in the air, mostly in unison or in a symmetry, right then left side. Barbieri, who worked with Ashton as a young performer, trained these dancers to perfection so that every step and position was perfectly wrought in space. The works are treasures and treated as such by the performers.

Another high point of the evening was Graziano’s exciting premiere “In A State of Weightlessness,” performed by five couples mirroring the slow counts beneath Glass’s music (“Tirol Concerto for Piano and Orchestra Mov.II”). The ballet seemed to be a recreation of the Japanese form of theater with the men dressed in dark pants and bare-chested but hardly seen behind the women in flesh-colored leotards blazing in individual spotlights. The men were assigned to lift and carry the women who opened and closed their legs and bodies in contorted positions, mostly in unison, but also in a rondo-form, first one, then the next couple, following one after another. If the women seemed weightless, then it was due to the men who were forced to carry them on their backs, shoulders and in their arms, quite a virtuoso performance by each member of the cast. The audience exploded in a standing ovation at the end.

Ella Baff, the artistic director of the Pillow, is to be congratulated for bringing the Sarasota Ballet up North, not to mention the multiple companies she has booked over the past 17 years under her direction. She leaves the beloved summer festival for a new assignment in New York at the end of the season.