

Dance Scene

Existentia

Origen Cultural Festival,
Riom – July 2, 2020

IT WAS A SPINE-TINGLING moment to once again see dancers live on stage. Hands were held, arms and legs wrapped and entwined, and bodies lifted high, just like dancers have always done. There was hope after the long months of COVID-19 when the virus took control of our lives.

In a courageous move, the *Origen Cultural Festival*, in Riom in the Swiss Alps, premieres eight new dance works over six weeks, opening with *Existentia* by Craig Davidson. Six dancers – audience and artists coming together in a shared experience that no recorded image can match. It was the first step on an uncertain path, but felt like a renaissance. As director, Giovanni Netzer, said in his brief opening speech: “This is not about entertainment, it’s about preserving our culture.”

The performing space is unique, a minimal square platform set inside the rough stone walls of the 800-year-old castle. The austere, steeply tiered auditorium holds 200 but was socially distanced to 100 seated in chequerboard fashion. It’s the perfect setting for a festival celebrating the great legends of the Middle Ages.

Existentia captured the mood of the times. Working loosely around the theme of the Holy Grail, Davidson takes the quest for the elusive chalice that has spawned a thousand mythical fantasies and roots it firmly in the human condition. The universal search for happiness, and something better, is signalled first in the opening circle where passions are expressed in a flurry of gesture and



Jonathan Emilian Heck and
Lucas Valente in *Existentia*.

strong movement and, later, in the return to the circle, in a closing moment of togetherness. It gives space for six highly individual dancers, all from Ballett Zürich, to find their own path and purpose.

Courtly love, noble knights and damsels in distress are passé themes, but the search for love and beauty is not. Davidson’s choreography is modern in line, energetic and powerful yet unashamedly infused with lyrical beauty. Within the well-structured 60-minute work of ensemble, trios and duets, each dancer has solo moments of individual expression.

The costumes, by former Ballett Zürich dancer Christopher John Parker, embrace both the Arthurian theme and the dancers’ individuality in strikingly original designs. Suggesting armour or period dress with the merest detail on a sleeve or legging, he drops a hint that transports the imagination to a different world. Choreographer and designer work in parallel, as in the scene where the women dispense with

pointe shoes and move with contemporary weight and depth. Here, Parker created long-fringed tabards to add period drama and give the movements an exhilarating after-image.

The commissioned score by Jonathan Emilian Heck wove around the work. The opening atmospheric murmur that builds to a sea of sound waves yields to a string quartet interpreting music that is imaginative and acutely sensitive to the emotional shifts on stage. Heck, with his violin, is drawn ever closer, even ascending the stairs to join Lucas Valente on stage. Valente supercharged the work in the most innovative and organic of solos, using the walls, stools and even momentarily usurping Heck’s seat in the pit.

Each solo finds a different register. Francesca Dell’Aria leaves a passionate relationship with Valente to enjoy dancing in elegant self-sufficiency. Michelle Willems’ emotionally-charged solo signals her as something of an outsider. Her soliloquy is interrupted by the arrival of the other dancers who support and welcome her back to the fold. Esteban Berlanga adds

brilliance to the mix then joins Jan Casier in a sensitive duet ending as they sit, relaxed, back-to-back. As the work reached its final stages, Elena Vostrotina – dressed in a simple beige shift – brought emotional depth to balance the aesthetic beauty of her exquisite arabesque and arching back. Her duet with Casier was a highlight, full of delight and ecstasy. *Existentia* is an inspiring work that takes tradition and wraps it in sleek modernity.

Switzerland responded to the coronavirus by shutting down quickly and firmly, and is now tentatively opening up. For two months after the March 13 lockdown, the Ballett Zürich dancers trained at home. On May 11, classes in the studio were again possible with dancers training in small groups, working two metres apart and with regular disinfection of the studios. From June 8, when the Federal Council removed restrictions on group training size, rehearsals for Christian Spuck’s *Sleeping Beauty* resumed. The dancers are now on their summer break but will return in the autumn to premiere the new ballet, hopefully on October 10. ■

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