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Australian Ballet – 50th Anniversary Gala – Melbourne

By Jordan Beth Vincent on November 12, 2012 in [Reviews](#) · 0 Comments



Australian Ballet in David McAllister's *Overture*.
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Australian Ballet

50th Anniversary Gala: *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux, Don Quixote pdd, Little Monsters, Giselle pdd, Swan Lake pdd, After the Rain pdd, Carmen pdd, Manon, Overture, Etudes*

Melbourne, State Theatre

31 October & 3 November 2012

www.australianballet.com.au

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It has been a big year for the Australian Ballet. A new *Swan Lake*, remounts of significant works such as Robert Helpmann's *The Display* and Graeme Murphy's *Beyond Twelve*, and now, a big, brash, ballet-style birthday party. The Friday performance (two nights after opening night) of the *Gala* was screened live to outdoor venues around the country and again, a few days later, on television. Even though this city seems to be suffering from an acute case of festival fatigue (the Melbourne Festival just ended a few weeks ago), dance fans came out in force for the big celebration. It was a program that harkened back to the big international Galas of previous years, as well as a nice reference to the company's first years, when artists including Sonia Arova, Erik Bruhn, Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev guest-starred.

However, there were a few disappointments even before the curtain rose this time around. Bolshoi Ballet and American Ballet Theatre star, David Hallberg, withdrew from the program, as did the performers from the Paris Opera Ballet, Dorothee Gilbert and Stéphane Bullion. In each case, replacements were called in at the last minute. Hallberg was replaced by the Australian Ballet's Kevin Jackson, who partnered Lana Jones in George Balanchine's *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux*. The Stuttgart Ballet stepped in for the Paris Opera Ballet by performing the wedding pas de deux from *Don Quixote*.

It may not have been the Nureyev adaptation we were expecting to see from Gilbert and Bullion of the Paris Opera Ballet; however it is hard to imagine a more exemplary performance of the variations than the one we saw by the dancers from the Stuttgart, Elisa Badenes and Daniel Camargo. Although neither Badenes nor Camargo are Principal Artists with the Stuttgart Ballet, these two dancers fully won over their Australian audience. Their second, decidedly non-classical, performance at the *Gala* demonstrated an impressive versatility: Demis Volpi's *Little Monsters* was sensuous and elegant, matching finely-articulated arm movements to a medley of Elvis Presley classics.

Dancers from the National Ballet of China and the San Francisco Ballet gave lovely performances of excerpts from *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* respectively. San Francisco Ballet artist (and Australian) Damian Smith partnered the Australian Ballet's Amber Scott in Christopher Wheeldon's *After the Rain*. This is an ideal role for Scott: the work demands control and precision, but is fairly straightforward emotionally. She looked gorgeous and very strong, and Smith was an excellent match for her. His story is an interesting one: though his hometown is Newcastle, his entire performing career has taken place overseas.

The least successful entry in the *Gala* was the Tokyo Ballet's excerpt of *Carmen*. Despite the valiant (yet completely over-the-top) effort of dancer Mizuka Ueno in the title role, this pas de deux failed to resonate with the audience. Her partner, Naoki Takagishi, spent much of the time standing in a corner looking agonized, and the only variation that featured him dancing was cut from the televised version of the *Gala*. Perhaps the problem with this *Carmen* was a choreographic one (the choreography was by Alberto Alonso), but these two dancers also seemed strangely mismatched, with Ueno's rather bombastic performance lacking in subtlety or nuance and Takagishi only providing a rather stolid presence onstage.



Elisa Badenes and Daniel Camargo in *Don Quixote*.
© Jeff Busby. (Click image for larger version)

Another highlight was Adam Bull partnering American Ballet Theatre's Julie Kent in the bedroom pas de deux from Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon*. In working with Kent, Bull clearly illustrates his potential as an actor; he has always seemed somewhat stifled and constrained in his dancing with Amber Scott. Kent was effusive and romantic in the role, dancing with sincerity and elegance and drawing a very mature performance out of her partner.

The Australian Ballet closed the program with Harald Lander's 1948 *Études*. Bull brought real verve to his performance in this work as well, generally unleashing with wide strides and soaring jumps. Perhaps Bull was buoyed by his fine performance in the first half of the *Gala* – whatever the reason, his increased energy was something of a delight. Principal artist Lucinda Dunn was outstanding in the lead role, but even she could not draw attention away from



Elisa Badenes and Daniel Camargo in *Little Monsters*.
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the general untidiness of the work in terms of timing and spacing on opening night.

There is much to love about Lander's *Études*, and much in this work that is significant in elevating key sequences from different Romantic and Classical ballets. We see them stretching at a barre – lean silhouettes against a turquoise backdrop. Lighting catches the pink tight-clad legs warming up or bodies leaping across the stage. But for all its beauty and interest, *Études* is a strangely un-Australian choice for a celebration of the Australian Ballet. In fact, the only work by an Australian choreographer was *Overture*, choreographed by the Australian Ballet's artistic director, David McAllister. We have seen very little of McAllister's choreography to date. The work featured nearly the entire company, with dancers arranged in lifts and lines or traveling in concentric circles. It served the purpose of displaying the company in magnificent, glittery



Julie Kent and Adam Bull in *Manon*.
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style, but probably does not signal McAllister's move into a choreographic career.



Austrian Ballet in David McAllister's *Overture*.
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To include both *Études* and *Overture* in the *Gala* seemed to be a lost opportunity, weighing down the program with a surfeit of white tutus. Where

was the risk, the vision, the sense of pushing the company in particular and the artform in general forward into the next fifty years? Alongside exciting performances by dancers from around the world, *Études* felt old-fashioned and *Overture* seemed unimaginative; and all in all the opening night performance dragged on a little too long.

Next year's repertoire has already been set: a season entitled *Masterpieces*. Like previous seasons, 2013 will be a mix of new and old: *La Sylphide*, *Don Quixote* (Nureyev's adaptation of Petipa's choreography) and *Paquita* alongside Alexei Ratmansky's *Cinderella*, Jiří Kylián's *Bella Figura* and Wayne McGregor's *Dyad 1929*.

Graeme Murphy's *Swan Lake*, a work that has never disappeared from the repertoire since its premiere, is coming back to Melbourne, inviting comparisons with Stephen Baynes' version which only premiered this year. Then again, *Swan Lake* was the first full-length work performed by the Australian Ballet in its premiere season in 1962, and has always represented a comfortable choice for its directors over the years.

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