



# OREGON ARTSWATCH

## OREGON'S ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

DANCE

### Dance review: The gender dynamics in OBT's Man/Woman

APRIL 17, 2018 // DANCE // OREGON ARTSWATCH

By HEATHER WISNER

Questioning gender politics in the tradition-minded and competitive world of ballet "can feel particularly risky—both emotionally and career wise," former New York City Ballet principal dancer Wendy Whelan told The New York Times in January. She was speaking after longtime NYCB artistic director Peter Martins retired from the company following accusations of [sexual misconduct and abuse](https://nyti.ms/2lBqZno) [https://nyti.ms/2lBqZno] by several NYCB dancers.

But as in other fields, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, dancers are beginning to take the risk. Last fall, choreographer Alexei Ratmansky [sparked a firestorm](#) with a Facebook post reading: "There is no such thing as equality in ballet: women dance on point[e], men lift and support women. women receive flowers, men escort women off stage. not the other way around (I know there are couple of exceptions), and I am very comfortable with that." Several high-profile dancers shot back, among them NYCB principal dancer Ashley Bouder, in an April 9 [Dance Magazine op-ed](#) titled "It's Time for Ballet to Embrace Feminism."

Meanwhile, Montreal's Les Grands Ballets Canadiens drew so much ire for its spring show *Femmes*, touted as a tribute to women but choreographed exclusively by men, that one choreographer quit, and the company wound up [changing the program's name](#) and theme entirely.



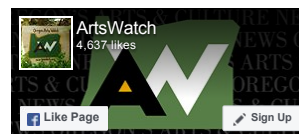
Emily Parker and Christopher Kaiser performing Nicolo Fonte's "Left Unsaid," one of five ballets presented in Oregon Ballet Theatre's MAN/WOMAN, April 12 – 24, 2018 at the Newmark Theatre. /Photo by James McGrew

Which brings us to Oregon Ballet Theatre's spring program *Man/Woman*, running through April 21 at the Newmark Theatre. The show, as OBT artistic director Kevin Irving explained in his program note, is a collection of work that allows gender to "speak" through dance, which it does, although what's missing may be as telling as what's there.



OBT dancers performing Darrell Grand Moultrie's "Fluidity Of Steel" in Oregon Ballet Theatre's MAN/WOMAN/Photo by Emily Nash

Of all the dances on the bill, Darrell Grand Moultrie's *Fluidity of Steel*, a continuation of his 2015 work *Instinctual Confidence*, most directly addresses gender. This engrossing piece for 11 men is broken into four sections; the first is breezy and athletic, with the ensemble, dressed in blue T-shirts and white slacks, vaulting off one another and eating up space in big jumps across the stage. The second section dives into notions of strength and vulnerability: even with ballet's evolution, it's still unusual to see bare-chested and bare-legged men in the classical world's most feminine garment, a tutu, and Michael Mazzola's lighting design underscores the contrast by emphasizing the male musculature as the dancers perform. The third section goes further still: men strike macho poses, fight, tease and embrace without hesitation, something else that is, sadly, a little surprising to see as well. I won't spoil the ending, but the overall effect is a vision of men both as they are and as they could be if we'd let them.



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Christopher Kaiser in James Canfield's "Drifted in a Deeper Land"/  
Photo by Yi Yin

*Drifted in a Deeper Land*, OBT founding artistic director James Canfield's 1990 piece lamenting lives lost to the AIDS epidemic, is also danced by an all-male ensemble. As part of the restaging process, Canfield stripped away the original music, which he felt lacked relevance in the modern era, leaving an elegant and somber seven-minute sweep of movement set against a shifting color scheme and punctuated by the dancers' breaths, the most overt suggestion of the fragility of life.

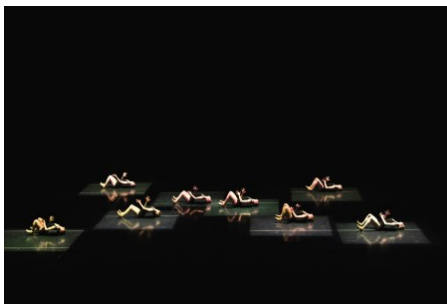
The sexes convene only once throughout the evening, in Nicolo Fonte's *Left Unsaid*, a work for three men, three women and three chairs. There is plenty of movement interest in this minimalist piece, with sculptural partnerships and arresting touches—the men upended on their backs to form armrests for the women; the women inverting and twiddling their feet in supported extensions.



Jacqueline Straughan performing Michel Fokine's "The Dying Swan," in Oregon Ballet Theatre's MAN/WOMAN/ Photo by James McGrew

As for the women, there's one piece just for one of them. Michel Fokine's 1905 solo for Anna Pavlova, *The Dying Swan*, is the odd bird in this heavily contemporary program, the only time pointe shoes make an appearance. While the work does speak to Pavlova's legacy (she toured the world with it, winning ballet converts and influencing subsequent generations of dancers) and does require a combination of strength and fragility, it's more of a look back than forward.

The more interesting choice here is the ensemble piece *Falling Angels*, noteworthy as OBT's first work from contemporary Czech choreographer Jiří Kylián, set to an early '70s percussive score by Steve Reich. Described as a piece exploring "the female dancer's drive for perfection," it's a strange and fascinating opportunity for the company's women to stretch themselves technically and artistically. Beginning with a slo-mo run toward viewers, the dancers form lines and huddles, break into solos with abandon, strike off-kilter angles, frame their faces with their arms, engage in a gestural language and barrel through runs and jumps at an increasingly manic pace. Joost Biegelaa's lighting design magnifies the strangeness, as women's disembodied faces emerge in pools of light, then recede in the darkness.



OBT dancers performing Jiří Kylián's "Falling Angels" in Oregon Ballet Theatre's MAN/WOMAN./Photo by Emily Nash

All of this is what *Man/Woman* has. What it doesn't have, as with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, is any work by female choreographers, and in an industry dominated by women, the dearth of female leadership—included in the making and directing of work—still needs addressing. As good as this program is, you can't help but wonder what work we're not seeing, and by whom.

To his credit, Irving recognizes that the issue exists, [telling Oregon Arts Watch](#), "We're not the entire conversation. We can only be a contribution to the conversation, incomplete, but hopefully insightful and maybe even revelatory in some ways." And in fairness, the Choreography XX program that he and the company presented last summer, with work exclusively by female choreographers, was a step in the right direction. (When a program like that is no longer noteworthy, we'll know we're making real progress.)

Next month OBT dancers Peter Franc, Mikino Hayashi and Katherine Monogue will create new work for *Closer*, a program that also includes Helen Simoneau's *Departures*, which debuted at Choreography XX; I'm looking forward to seeing what these dancers create, and how this very necessary discussion continues.

#### NOTES

*Man/Woman* continues through April 21, Newmark Theatre, 1111 SW Broadway, 503-222-5538

*Closer* runs May 24–June 3, BodyVox Dance Center, 1201 NW 17th Ave., 503-222-5538



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**One Response.**

1. Carol Shults says:

*April 20, 2018 at 6:45 pm*

Could this writer please explain her statement, "in a field dominated by women,etc."In what way "dominated"?

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