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Review: "New Dance" at Saint Joseph Ballet

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A piece by choreographer Stephanie Nugent

The folks at **Saint Joseph Ballet** have been in a conundrum for a few years now. How to give the Santa Ana dance school for low-income children a more prominent public face, without abandoning the institution's primary mission – giving a "leg up" to 400 disadvantaged youth through dance and the arts. You might think, as I have, isn't it enough, all the good works (free lessons, dance clothes, counseling, academic tutoring, etc.) done there for more than 20 years? Aren't the dozens of awards, grants and plaudits enough? And, more important even, what about the lives changed and radically improved, the children sent to college, thanks to Saint Joseph Ballet? The focus on more recognition has come to resemble an almost unseemly drive.

But **artistic director Melanie Rios Glaser**, the hand-picked successor of Saint Joseph founder **Beth Burns**, has her eyes on expanding the school's role and its 21,500- square foot facility into the Southern California professional dance community; she sees this as complementary, and not in conflict, with the Saint Joseph Ballet mission. She may be right. The first step is called "**New Dance**."

"**New Dance**" is an annual concert of adult choreography in the Saint Joseph Ballet 176-seat **Studio Theatre**. Saint Joseph's students or alumni figured to a small degree in the first two concerts. This year's performances, Feb. 22-23, were the first in which companies were picked from an open call.

I went Friday night and made the pleasant acquaintance of three of the four groups, all of which were new to me. Each company presented a short premiere (about 15 minutes); at least one of the works was a section from a proposed longer piece. They were a bit like vignettes, postcards if you will, rather than a choreographer's defining opus.

Still, there was a gem or two.

I felt that way about **Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith's "In Other Words,"** an entirely seated dance, clever in its symbolism and gestural vocabulary. Set to J.S. Bach cello pieces, the couple sat behind a white card table arranged with rows of military green figurines. From where I sat (more on that later) the toys appeared to be a mix of animals and humans, but they could have all been soldiers, too. The dance began with strategic overtones, the dancers using their hands (palms pressed together) to knife out trenches and territory for their armies. Eventually, all the figures clattered to the floor, and the dancers warily touched one another. These tautly constructed phrases of stretching and leaning, pointing and putting a hand over the other's mouth were simple but perfectly synchronized. Every action had a reaction, their upper bodies ricocheting to suggest a mating battle. All the while, the duo wore wry facial expressions that bespoke competitive urgency. There was a kiss quickly planted, too, though. When they stood up, the dance was over. A nice touch.

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Choreographer and dancer **Rebecca Pappas's "Monster: Portrait 4,"** was a serio-comedic snapshot of our inherent inhumanity. The title's four monsters were a quartet of stupidly grinning women in Pippi Longstocking braids and loose shorts with suspenders.

With jerky steps and the exaggerated awkwardness of toddlers, the "girls" at first played nicely to **Ahavia Raba's** folkloric sounding tunes. The childish games turned to meanness, however, as one woman began to bully and knock over the others. She conquered one, walking on her prone body and finally pulling off her wig and raising it overhead as a trophy. The others covered. It made for an effectively discomfoting tableaux, thanks to committed performances by **Pappas, Arletta Anderson, Courtney Bradley and Elisa Lo.**

Ana María Alvarez's "Brackish Waters" for the six men of her company, **contra-tiempo,** was situated in similar territory – play that morphs into violence. Alvarez didn't tell a specific story, but crafted a high-velocity, athletic trial. Her dance was organized into various drills of running, tumbling and jumping. The guys criss-crossed the space with a forward and retreating motion. They roughly and briefly embraced for a couple's dance, but then flipped their partners heels over head. The last scene began almost as the opening did, with one fellow scrambling on the backs of his pals and leaping off — whether to freedom, or into a worse situation, it was unclear. Cesar Alvarez (Ana María's brother) composed the infectious music. Company members **Peter Araiza, Cristian Armas, Cesar Garfiaz, Richie Marin, Omar Rodriguez and Emeka Simmons** performed with explosive, spontaneous and unstudied energy; they didn't meet our expectations of dancers and the piece was stronger for it.

Stephanie Nugent's "Small Spaces" was the program's one disappointment, unfocused in intent and vague in its performance. Four women and one man ran across the stage on a diagonal, and dove into bent-leg hand stand; this thematic phrase recurred occasionally. Nugent's naturalistic vocabulary of walks and runs focused on weight-shifting; arms and upper bodies registered little. There was seriousness that read like blankness – no trajectory, no feelings, no intensity. A few dancers blew air into megaphones. One woman removed her shirt, revealing a thin worn sports bra, and yet this provocation was another blank. Composer **Robin Cox** played a violin to recorded music, and video projections of stairs and trees rolled past on a screen behind the dancing, but the details provided no clues.

Co-curator **Ben Tusher** contributed sensitive lighting designs to each work. OK, about where I was sitting. The Studio Theatre is outfitted with folding chairs and risers for performances. The problem now are its sightlines. I was about half-way back, on the first riser, and when the dancers were on the floor, they disappeared from view. This is a significant problem that can only be fixed, I'm guessing, by removing about the first three rows of chairs. This might not be practical, I'm afraid. If Saint Joseph is serious about becoming a respected dance presenter, it will have to find some solution.

"**New Dance**" continues 8 p.m., Feb. 23, 1810 Main St., Santa Ana. Tickets \$10. [Click here for more information.](#)

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