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In Praise of a Virile Star of the Bolshoi

Ballet galas are not for the fainthearted. Full of Big International Stars and Big International Egos, high on technical tricks and low on artistic integrity, they are like a buffet of delicious dishes that makes you feel full in no time.

DANCE REVIEW

ROSLYN
SULCAS

But although “Vladimir Vasiliev: A Gala Tribute to a Dance Legend,” presented by Youth America Grand Prix on Saturday night at City Center, was 3½ hours long and contained the usual squirm-inducing moments, it was also more interesting than most.

That was mostly because the gala had a real focus — the celebration of the 70th birthday of Mr. Vasiliev, the great Bolshoi Ballet star who embodied the virility and strength of that company’s men after their American debut in 1959. Several pieces by Mr. Vasiliev were on the program, as were two works by Kasyan Goleizovsky, a mentor to George Balanchine in the 1920s and to Igor Moiseyev, whose dances were also featured.

Together with films that offered montages of Mr. Vasiliev in various roles — a dazzlingly charismatic performer even in the fuzziest footage — and an introduction by the ballerina Carla Fracci, the program suggested some actual thought had gone into the planning.

The Goleizovsky pieces were both solos, the delicately pretty “Mazurka,” to Scriabin, danced by the winsome Daria Khokhlova from the Bolshoi, and the busy “Narcissus,” performed by the Royal Ballet principal Ivan Putrov. The Moiseyev dances were more compelling, with Oleg Chernasov magically creating two figures from his doubled-



Polina Semionova and David Hallberg in Béjart’s “Romeo and Juliet” pas de deux.

A dazzlingly charismatic performer turns 70.

over body in “Two Boys in a Fight,” and a stirring trio offering brilliantly percussive footwork and exuberance in “Gaucho.”

Other high points came from American Ballet Theater’s David Hallberg, who imbued Frederick Ashton’s rarely seen “Dance of the Blessed Spirits” with fluid grace, and, with the striking Polina Semionova (a principal at the Berlin State Opera Ballet), who

Vladimir Vasiliev

A Gala Tribute to a Dance Legend

City Center

offered an affecting account of Maurice Béjart’s “Romeo and Juliet” pas de deux.

The Kirov’s Yevgenia Obraztsova, nicely coquettish, and the Paris Opera Ballet’s Emmanuel Thibault, rather deadpan, gave a technically impeccable account of a “Sylphide” pas de deux. Ballet Theater’s Daniil Simkin rightly earned the night’s greatest applause in Ben van Cauwenbergh’s “Bourgeois,” set to Jacques Brel and imbued by Mr. Simkin with slouchy, Baryshnikov-like charm and virtuosity.

Low points — did I mention squirming? — came most notably from a leg-around-the-ears solo, “Lacrimosa” by Chiara Tanesini, danced by the Rome Ballet’s Giuseppe Picone.

Mr. Vasiliev’s own choreography, full of big Bolshoi lifts and dramatic moments, doesn’t add up to much, but was performed with conviction, notably by the New York City Ballet principal Ashley Bouder in “Tarantella,” and by Mr. Vasiliev and Ms. Khokhlova in the evening’s pièce d’occasion set to a Chopin “Ballad No. 1 in G Minor” (played onstage by Max Barros).

Mr. Vasiliev, a portrait of grief as Ms. Khokhlova floated delicately around him, might well have been paying homage to his wife, the ballerina Ekaterina Maximova, who died almost a year ago. Afterward, the dancers laid their bouquets at his feet, in an unscripted, touching homage of their own.

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Vladimir Vasiliev, left, with Ana Sophia Scheller and Joseph Phillips, center, at City Center.