

Smuin dancers charm in whimsical ‘Sushi Roll’

By Leslie Katz
S.F. Examiner Staff Writer

Smuin, the Bay Area’s most fun ballet troupe, is closing its 24th season with a premiere by Val Caniparoli called “If I Were A Sushi Roll.”

The contemporary dance, a crowd-pleaser on a three-piece program of 21st century works that opened last weekend in The City, perfectly complements the charming baroque pop album “Confessions” by Nico Muhly and Teitur, who coyly celebrate everyday life with wonder and nicely manage to stop short of being too cute.

Caniparoli, a veteran choreographer from San Francisco Ballet, does so, too, taking cues from “Confessions” songs’ lyrics in the nine-vignette work, which references everything from coffee to computer printers, and even Jane Fonda. In its opening sequence, the lithe dancers, down on their bums with toes pointed in the air, adorably copy the actress’ iconic 1980s workout pose.

Decked in basic black (the women with little boots on their feet), the troupe whirls, swirls

and punches under the eye of a cartoon-like security camera stationed in the upper corner of the stage.

It watches the mesmerizing action, from six jumping women who are “Sick of Fish,” to the charged romantic interlude of “Her First Confession” with Terez Dean, Ben Needham-Wood and Maxwell Simoes, to soloist Mengjun Chen, doing a jig to the Celtic sounds of “Nowheresville.”

Robert Kretz curls up like a piece of sushi, squishing himself into a larger-than-life dish (fantastic scenic design by Douglas Schmidt) in “Small Spaces,” which ends the piece on a touching, melancholy note.

Less whimsical but equally compelling is Helen Pickett’s 2016 “Oasis,” a flowing dance set to music by soundtrack composer Jeff Beal complete with shower sounds, tension-mounting percussion and tinkling piano. Emma Kingsbury’s costumes (body suits suggesting amphibians), video and set design (evoking clouds and sheets of rain) offer an atmospheric backdrop to the movement by 10 fluid dancers,

often in lovely pairs.

Pair work also lights up Amy Seiwert’s “Falling Up,” the program opener. Set to Brahms (played by pianist Daniel Sullivan), it exemplifies the company’s commitment to classical forms.

At the same time, strong, passionate performances at Saturday’s matinee by Nicole Haskins, Oliver Paul-Adams, Valerie Harmon, Dustin James, Lauren Pschirrer, Kretz, Erica Chipp-Adams and Needham-Wood felt fresh and vibrant, a welcome reality in these days when dance fans are pondering ballet’s future.

Choreographer-in-residence Seiwert, who’s leaving the troupe for a job at Sacramento Ballet, created “Falling Up” in 2007, not long after the death of her mentor, company founder Michael Smuin.

Though some traditionalists derided his show biz focus, Smuin’s emphasis on entertainment shouldn’t be overlooked; in today’s changing times, his unbound ideals ought to remain in practice, and treasured.



COURTESY CHRIS HARDY

Tessa Barbour and John Speed Orr have fun in “If I Were A Sushi Roll,” a premiere in Smuin Dance Series 02, continuing through June across the Bay Area.

REVIEW: Smuin Dance Series 02

Where: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 700 Howard St., S.F.

When: 8 p.m. Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

Ticket: \$32 to \$79

Contact: (415) 912-1899, www.smuinballet.org
Note: Performances continue May 11-12 in Walnut Creek and May 24-27 in Mountain View.