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Smuin walks a line both tender and tough

By Steven Winn

What's Johnny Cash doing with a passel of ballet dancers? Dang near stealing the show is all.

Not that the gravel-voiced singer/songwriter did it single-handedly at the Cowell Theater, where Smuin Contemporary Ballet opened its San Francisco fall run on Friday, Sept. 27. Major credit goes to choreographer James Kudelka and the loping, cowboy-booted comrades, loners, brawlers and lovers portrayed by a beguiling quartet of company dancers in "The Man in Black."

With Cash carving out his songs and covers of heartache and flinty masculinity on tape (he died in 2003), Ian Buchanan, Peter Kurta, Ben Needham-Wood and Terez Dean Orr became a band of brothers (and one sister) bound together by a singular American musical temperament. Cash's growly, confiding voice, covering Ian Tyson, Nine Inch Nails and the Beatles among others, was the soundtrack of their suffering and need for each other.

Striding onstage together and loyally sticking together through thick and thin for most of the way, these fine, fearless dancers mined the choreographer's rich vein of dance styles, from square dance to two-step, swing to a square-jawed, straight-backed toe tap.

Kudelka uses the basic grammar of the country-and-western line dance to knit all these various dance allusions together. But his "Man" (2010) is anything but a pastiche. In its tenderness and emotional toughness, its embrace of both pain and vulnerability, the outsider's isolation and the power of community, the piece proved cumulatively moving and powerful.

Chris Hardy

Smuin dancer Tessa Barbour is lifted in the air by the men of the company in Michael Smuin's "Carmina Burana."

Dressed mostly in black and dark plaid and assuming stoic expressions on their faces, the dancers said what they were feeling with their bodies. Sometimes one of them would break loose and be exiled from the group and either shrug it off or suffer in solitary anguish, head in hands. Then they'd all get together again, one of them hoisted up on the others' shoulders for a wider look around the bare-stage prairie.

One poignant scene had two of the dancers operating the other two as rag dolls. A love scene and a couple of fights played out this way, and the effect was both funny and mordant. Are we puppets of our emotions, Kudelka asked, or playthings to be used up and discarded by each other?

The dancers, who were wrung out and flinging drops of sweat by the end, gave every notion that came and went their all. Even when they went limp and collapsed on the floor, they seemed fully present and ready to get up and get ready for whatever was around the next bend.

The evening opened with "Take Five," Rex Wheeler's world premiere suite of eight dances set to music by Dave Brubeck. It came off as bright and breezy, with flashes of wit and style and not a whole lot more than that. But it was enough as a curtain raiser, with the dancers dashing around to form duos and trios and full-on company numbers at the beginning and end. A good time was had by all, even if the dancing tended to blur together and look a lot alike.

Smuin Contemporary Ballet: Dance Series 1: "Take Five" by Rex Wheeler; "The Man in Black" by James Kudelka; "Carmina Burana" by Michael Smuin. Through Sunday, Oct. 6. $25-$97. Cowell Theater, Fort Mason, 2 Marina Blvd., S.F. (415) 912-1899, www.smuinballet.org

Kaori Higashiyama costumed an ensemble of 10 in bright, body-hugging colors — hot pink, chartreuse, electric blue — with vivid lighting by Michael Oesch to match. The mood was playful, the balletic movement jazz inflected. Hips popped gently. Fingers splayed. The women ran their hands lightly over the men's bodies now and then, grinning innocently as if they didn't know what they were up to. It was as if Bob Fosse had been run through a soft filter. The sexiness here was safe and family friendly.

Taken on its own easygoing terms, "Take Five" had its pleasures. Maggie Carey, Buchanan and Tessa Barbour pranced through "I'm in a Dancing Mood," making cat paw keyboard-playing motions before settling into a silky three-way ballroom dance.

Brubeck's gloss on "Camptown Races" was a celebration of muscular male thighs. Zachary Artice pulled off some snaky, spine-snapping moves in "Unsquare Dance." The finale, "Blue Rondo à la Turk," reprised a lot of what had come before, a slick if redundant summary.

The evening came to a heavy close with "Carmina Burana," a 1977 work by company founder Michael Smuin, who died in 2007. Choreographed to Carl Orff's blunt 1937 setting of medieval lyrics about human pleasure and folly, the piece showcases its creator's flair for striking stage pictures and use of the body as living sculpture.

Some of it had a brooding authority on opening night. Dancers crouched down like primal, pre-human creatures with wing-span arms. They hoisted each other up in ecstatic aspiration or fetal acquiescence. The women, especially in the high vocal passages, spent a fair amount of time on pointe. There was some fetching Mediterranean folk dancing along the way.

But this "Carmina" grew wearisome. The dancers didn't always look like they were fully committed to the cause, whether in pulse-pounding scenes or the more lyrical passages. The requisite rhythmic tension and tautness went slack at times. It might have been a miscalculation to place the piece at the end of a long evening.

Johnny Cash and Dave Brubeck, to a lesser degree, held the stronger cards and got to play them first.

Steven Winn is The San Francisco Chronicle's former arts and culture critic.