

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Dancing Shakespeare “Al Fresco”

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, July 17th, 2019

The low slung charcoal grey structure sits innocuously amid truck depots and industrial buildings in this transitioning arts district stretch adjacent to the LA river. Drive by too fast risks missing the spare signage and the driveway to the fenced parking and the destination, a state of the art dance studio, performance space and the rehearsal home of LA Dance Project. Executive director Lucinda Lent and producer Loïc Noisette introduce Lent’s two dogs who lead the way into the spacious interior the dance company shares with the Ghebaly Gallery. On a day that is headed for a heat wave, the air conditioned studio is a comfortable refuge as LA Dance Project rehearses for Tuesday’s Hollywood Bowl performance of *Romeo & Juliet*.



David Adrian Freeland Jr. and Janie Taylor in LA Dance Project’s “Romeo & Juliet”. Photo courtesy of Lucinda Lent.

Choreographed by LADP artistic director Benjamin Millepied with the lush Prokofiev score conducted by LA Phil conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, the upcoming performance is the second edition *Romeo & Juliet* with these collaborators. LADP opened its studio rehearsal for a preview look at how this site specific venture is being adapted for a new venue and several new dance sections that will expand the dancing portion.

At Disney Hall last October, the first installment in this long-term project brought LADP’s dozen dancers onto a narrow stage in front of the orchestra and Dudamel. At the outset, their entrance in athletic shoes and plaid streetwear declared this might be the same evocative Sergei Prokofiev score, but instead of Kenneth MacMillan’s traditional Romeo and Juliet, it was more Baz Luhrmann, contemporary and stripped down to its essential characters.



Janie Taylor and David Adrian Freeland Jr. Photo courtesy of LADP.

When the dancers exited after the initial dance, the orchestra continued playing the score. A short while later the dancers reassembled in an office area offstage at Disney Hall, then moved outside to the Disney garden, the photogenic metal-clad exterior, back inside to a basement service area, and at one point appeared in the audience their movement descending the aisle. The Disney audience watched the episodes of offstage dancing filmed by the choreographer and livestreamed onto on a

giant screen above the orchestra.

At the time of the Disney performance, other presentations were in discussion. Plans include an eventual filmed version filmed at venues throughout L.A. with the LA Phil conducted by Dudamel providing the soundtrack.



LA Dance Project. Photo courtesy of Lucinda Lent.

This Hollywood Bowl iteration brings some significant changes. Additional dance sections have been added and the larger, outdoor venue presents new possibilities and challenges. The Bowl has a wider and slightly deeper stage in front of the orchestra as well as the curved raised section behind the first set of boxes. When the dancers move off the Bowl stage, the wandering-about will have the audience aisles and backstage, plus escalators, concession stands and all those parking lots

With Millepied still en route from Europe, LADP Associate Artistic Director Sebastien Marcovici is conducting the last studio rehearsal before the dancers move to the Bowl for the first of several on site rehearsals.

A costume fitting on one dancer takes a few extra minutes of Marcovici's attention before he enters the studio to start. Dancers have been marking sections or warming up during the short wait.

An early group section gets attention for several traffic issues including a running sequence with a tricky lift exploding out of the compacted group and later on the timing of a syncopated series of flicking arms and heads. Before running the section with music, long wooden benches are moved away from the wall to the middle of the room to mark off the Bowl's stage space. The section is repeated in the narrowed space with the intricately timed clustering and life showing the attention.



David Adrian Freeland Jr. Photo courtesy of Lucinda Lent.

Not included in this initial group section is David Adrian Freeland Jr. who dances Romeo. He's behind the benches marking a solo section that is run next. As Freeland runs his solo, dancers move two portable ballet barres away from the walls to leave a back corner clear. The dancers forming a sharp u-shape along the walls. Freeland joins the group for a fierce segment that repeatedly shifts the focus to Nathan B. Makolandra who dances Tybalt.



Nathan B Makolandra as Tybalt and LADP dancers. Photo by Ann Haskins.

Marcovici walks over to discuss spacing and the timing of various moves. Almost all of the current cast are veterans of Disney Hall. Quick discussion resolves most matters. Only rarely during the rehearsal does a question prompt a look at the video on Marcovici's laptop for an answer.

In the early dances, everyone is in soft ballet shoes or socks, but after several sections, they change

into identical athletic shoes with the distinctive black Nike swoosh. Because of the running between sections and out of doors, ballet slippers have less traction. The athletic shoes also fit the contemporary tone of the approach..



Janie Taylor as Juliet. Photo courtesy of Lucinda Lent.

While the rest finish changing shoes, Janie Taylor and Freeland run their pas de deux. They mark some sections and other parts are fully danced. A series of arm movements on the floor that are supposed to end with Taylor spinning her partner around doesn't quite click. On the first try, her arm doesn't go over her much taller partner's head and Freeland is stalled and he doesn't spin. After a chuckle and a few different tries, the move works and they finish the pas de deux.

One of the new sections is an exuberant trio for Aaron Carr as Mercutio, Doug Baum as Benvolio, and Freeland on their way to the fateful party where Romeo meets Juliet. The trio's jovial bonhomie ends and the trio rejoins the dancers back in that corner as the music segues into more dramatic fare.



Aaron Carr, David Adrian Freeland Jr., & Doug Baum. Photo by Ann Haskins.

When not directly involved in the section being rehearsed, dancers on the side tend either tend to understudying the movements or marking another section, except when the final deadly fight scene begins. As Tybalt and Romeo, Makolandra and Freeland both dance large and strong. Even partially marking the choreography, the struggle veers from mixed martial arts to Greco-Roman wrestling and a street fight. Throughout the fight scene, the rest of the dancers watch intently from the sides and the scene's end brings applause .

The parsing and repetition inherent in a rehearsal clarifies the choreographer's intent in some of his movement choices and displays how deeply LADP dancers' strengths in both ballet and contemporary dance combine to allow them to shift almost seamlessly from one style to another.



Janie Taylor and David Adrian Freeland Jr. Photo courtesy of LADP.

One big change is the video screen. At Disney Hall, the live stream appeared on one large screen that usually is not present. The Bowl comes with permanent banks of video screens tailor made for this dance event. As if R&J is not enough, the program also includes Dvořák's Cello Concerto with cellist Pablo Ferrández. Hollywood Bowl, 2301 N. Highland Ave., Hollywood; Tues., July 16, 8 p.m., \$1-\$168. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com>.

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