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SFDanceworks takes flight through the dark

By Mary Ellen Hunt

Perhaps it is a reflection of a tumultuous and unsettled era that the four works presented during the weekend at the Cowell Theater by SFDanceworks, the young company founded by former San Francisco Ballet soloist James Sofranko, offered a kind of dark provocation with a variety of textures.

Danielle Rowe's "The Old Child" was a more theatrical premiere for the company, an atmospheric meditation played out to David Knight's musical accompaniment and live on-stage manipulation of recorded loops composed by Alton San Giovanni. "The Old Child" came cloaked in a melancholy, established immediately by the muscled and compelling Britt Juleen, whom we saw only from behind for most of the ballet,

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Alexander Renoff-Olson

Garrett Anderson (left) and Anne Zivolich-Adams lead the ensemble in "Jardí Tancat."

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but whose supple upper body tics provided the springboard for vignettes that felt like haunting memories conjured by the shudder of an arm or shake of a head. The mood ran from playful romance in Anne Zivolich-Adams and Garrett Anderson's pas de deux; to self-absorbed posing in a duet for Katerina Eng and Dana Genshaft; to reflective in Nicholas Korkos' solo; to dangerous, perhaps even violent, in Laura O'Malley's encounter with Brett Conway. Rowe's spare but effective approach had echoes — in the deep extended pliés, the slow-motion silent scream and the engine of psychodrama — of Swedish choreographer Mats Ek.

A tender duet for O'Malley and Anderson centered Sofranko's premiere, "Homing," which featured a quintet of dancers, accompanied ably by pianist Ronny Michael Greenberg. Throughout, the five dancers returned to a stiff tableau reminiscent of uncomfortable family portraits. O'Malley's fluid yet downward-focused solo — a contrast to the soaring delicacy of the Schubert impromptu that it was set to — took flight when Anderson joined her, and yet came to an ambiguous, disquieting end.

Also disquieting, though perhaps not intentionally, was Penny Saunders' "Snap," a duet for Rowe and Conway set to music by Ólafur Arnalds and



Alexander Renoff-Olson

Britt Juleen (left), Laura O'Malley, David Knight and Brett Conway in "The Old Child."

Nils Frahm. Saunders has said she was inspired to create a kind of adult version of pat-a-cake, but "Snap" also added a manipulative edge. In Jim French's twilight lighting, disrupted by the glare of three lamps tipped on the floor, the dancers' fingers, arms and legs intruded on each other's space in a back-and-forth that felt both confrontational and fragmentary, and ended without necessarily feeling fully developed.

The program closed with "Jardi Tancat," created by Spanish choreographer Nacho Duato. Set to folk tunes sung by María del Mar Bonet, it's the kind of piece that is often most

effective when there is complete consonance among the six dancers, in part because Duato's highly musical and gestural choreography throws any differences in execution into stark relief. That makes it a tricky choice for a company of highly individual dancers who come together to perform for only a few weeks out of the year.

And yet, SFDanceworks offered a compelling view of "Jardi Tancat" that was less about steps and more about the sensitivity and intelligence of each dancer. The three couples — Zivolich-Adams and Garrett, O'Malley and Korkos, Rowe and Conway — brought a special intensity and sense of ur-

gency to the choreography: No one confronts an audience with a head-on stare with quite the sharp directness that Zivolich-Adams does.

This is not an abstract ballet, but one about struggle and pride, and given veteran performers like these, it moves past the quirky rhythms and iconic motifs — covering the face with both hands, flaring arms out like wings — to shift focus onto their internal worlds. It's a credit to the work's archetypal simplicity and solid construction that the 35-year-old ballet, Duato's first creation, still packs an emotional punch, particularly in the hands of these artists.

Sofranko has gathered danc-

ers in this company with a breadth of experiences that range from companies such as the Nederlands Dans Theater, to local mainstays such as ODC and Lines Ballet. Now, with three polished and thoughtfully curated seasons under its belt, SFDanceworks has the promise of being more than just a summer pickup project.

Sofranko founded the troupe in 2014 while he was still dancing with San Francisco Ballet as a soloist, and it has proved a key building block in his career transition. He retired in May after an 18-year career with the Ballet and is leaving to take over Grand Rapids Ballet as artistic director next month. Thankfully, his plans to maintain SFDanceworks will keep him connected to San Francisco audiences. Rowe, who has been involved as both choreographer and performer, is now the associate artistic director and will undoubtedly hold down the fort while Sofranko is in Michigan.

And yet this does raise the question of what the purpose of SFDanceworks will be in light of Sofranko's commitments to a larger company with a wider repertoire. Whether this venture continues to be a vehicle for artistic exploration, a hot-house for commissioned chamber works, or just a nice opportunity to see some favorite dancers in the summer months remains to be seen.

Mary Ellen Hunt is a Bay Area freelance writer.