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Sparks Often Appear in a Tango's Dark Tone

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY SEPT. 25, 2009

Is there anything the Fall for Dance audience doesn't love? On Thursday night it cheered to the rafters all four items of the second of the festival's five programs at City Center. Two of the performances struck me as horrid, but — though this is ungenerous to the Martha Graham Dance Company in Graham's "Diversion of Angels" — the only part of the program that much mattered to me was the appearance of the Argentine tango dancers Gabriel Missé and Natalia Hills.

These two performers are busy this week in New York. On Tuesday they celebrated their new company, Tangueros del Sur, at a private reception. Late on Wednesday night they appeared as part of a milonga at the Lafayette Grill on Franklin Street in TriBeCa. On Thursday and Friday they presented Tangueros del Sur as part of Fall for Dance. On Sunday they're scheduled to teach tango at the Pearl Studios before appearing as part of a milonga at the Alvin Ailey Center.

The word milonga has several meanings. Here I mean a dance gathering in which the floor may clear for appearances by stars but that will continue more informally with other couples. Aficionados all say that they prefer to watch the best tango dancers in a milonga setting.

I've loved watching Mr. Missé and Ms. Hills dance in other contexts (at a tango spectacular at Symphony Space and in two galas at the Vail International Festival). I don't spend much time watching YouTube; for them I make an exception. But to watch the tango dancing by other couples at the Lafayette Grill on Wednesday was already a delight — this is the kind of amateur performing a critic gets to see too seldom, much of it marvelously stylish — and, when Mr. Missé and Ms. Hills took over the floor for two improvised duets, the emotion became purest joy.

All those appearances have been to recorded music. Their new company employs live music; the playing — keyboard, violin, cello, double bass, bandoneón — is admirable. Only occasionally, however, does it achieve the brilliant sweep of classic tango. (Musically, tango is often thought to have peaked a few decades ago.)

The same is true of the choreography, which is all by Ms. Hills. The show at City Center was an excerpt from "Romper el Piso" ("Break the Floor"). Whenever it attempted a form larger than the duet, it looked choreographed in the bad sense (unspontaneous), and there were some ponderously overchoreographed bows. The duets, especially when Mr. Missé was involved, had sparks, marvels and beauties, but never quite matched the

overall glory of the best work I have seen these two dancers achieve. (Tango is often most ravishing when the performers seemed conjoined from head to thigh, with all the main action happening beneath the knee; but “Romper el Piso” was short of the real brow-to-brow or cheek-to-cheek intimacy that was a thrill at the Lafayette Grill and on other occasions.)



Natalia Hills and Gabriel Missé performing in “Romper el Piso” (“Break the Floor”) at City Center on Thursday night. Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

More than anything I have seen them dance before, “Romper el Piso” drew my attention to differences between Ms. Hills and Mr. Missé. She (wearing exaggeratedly heavy eye makeup on Thursday) too often delivers the smoldering, fatalistic, vampish tango image of cliché; he, far fresher and lighter in manner, allows the different colors of the dance to emerge kaleidoscopically, moment by moment. **They are beautifully matched in many ways: when gliding across the floor, they sometimes give the impression of floating, as a friend remarked, and they both can produce coruscating footwork.**

But the most breathtaking moments belong to Mr. Missé. Even when I was seated close by at the Lafayette Grill, there were moments when his feet were apparently moving so fast — brilliantly cross-stitching the same point in the floor while swiveling his body to

and fro, all while holding Ms. Hills close — my eye just couldn't take in their detail. I especially love the ankles-crossed position in which he travels at top speed (again, while partnering).

Ms. Hills can shine with another dancer (so can Mr. Missé), but in "Romper el Piso" she keeps forcing the dark and erotic tones of the choreography; with Mr. Missé, these same qualities, arriving by surprise, make more of an impression. He is a sensational dancer: one of the few today whose artistry seems miraculous.

As for the other parts of the Fall for Dance program, "Diversion of Angels" is probably the work most people have seen the Graham company dance in recent decades; its different views of love and contrasting types of womanhood are always, if intermittently, interesting. On Thursday the company delivered it, as usual now, with an overlay of facial expressions that diminished the choreography; but after the first five minutes the dancers found a new vitality — brightness of attack and musical impulse — that kept rubbing some of the familiarity off the old material.

The subtitle of the Morphoses troupe is the Wheeldon Company. But in this program it performed "Softly as I Leave You," choreographed not by Christopher Wheeldon but by the husband-and-wife team Lightfoot León (Paul Lightfoot and Sol León), which did a great deal to confirm my worst misgivings about Morphoses itself. "Softly as I Leave You" was a repulsive piece featuring most of the worst clichés of European postwar choreography.

The music was fluent adagio by Bach and Arvo Pärt, so the two dancers thrashed and flailed hard and sharp against it. Drew Jacoby began by showing us how she could writhe inside a narrow box; Rubinald Pronk did a perfect impersonation of the performing manner of Jorge Donn (for many years the leading light of Maurice Béjart's Ballet of the 20th Century), especially in the reverential way in which he pressed his cheek to the floor while presenting his face glamorously to the audience. Both suggested that Dance = Torment and that they come from a land where nobody has ever been either happy or sincere.

Stijn Celis's 2002 version of Stravinsky's "Noces," danced by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, had many incidental virtues. Men and women did some real dancing, with footwork, full-bodied vigor and strongly rhythmical phrasing. Mr. Celis hears some of the changes of rhythm in Stravinsky's great score, but only a few; at no point do you hear the music better for watching.

And what a hideous piece of theater: a dance hall for marital couplings that often turned into male manipulation of women or just plain rape. Makeup and costumes were bizarre on purpose; the image was of both men and women participating energetically in a sexual ritual that gave nobody the least satisfaction or pride.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/26/arts/dance/26roma.html>