



REVIEW

Eloquence, edge lift 'Ravel Project'

Choreographer, troupe illuminate composer's musical theme, challenge moral and political issues.

By MARK LYNCH
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The musical genius of French Impressionist composer Maurice Ravel intersected Friday evening in the Kravis Center's Rinker Playhouse with the keen and deeply impassioned interpretive instincts of French-born choreographer Pascal Rioult in *The Ravel Project*.

This is the Rioult company's extraordinary, emotionally disarming four-piece work synthesizing European sensibility and American modern dance.

Trained in America in Graham and Cunningham technique, Rioult also has the musically keen intuitions of an orchestral conductor as exemplified in *Bolero*, which closed the evening. The most purely abstract piece on the program, this 16-minute work could be precisely the kind of danced representation of the music that Leonard Bernstein might have chosen to explain this composition to children in his legendary series of Young People's Concerts. Rioult's choreography unerringly illustrates — indeed, illuminates — Ravel's musical construction that builds in sensuality: eight



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consecutive iterations of the famous musical theme, each with a change in timbre by soloist, as well in the orchestral underscoring.

Mirroring that concept, each of Rioult's eight dancers is consecutively given one extended *legato* phrase danced in place in a small pool of light juxtaposed against the ensemble's mechanistic phrases that are characterized by impersonal body isolations and slashing arm movements that cut through the air while the company also continuously changes places in two lines around each soloist.

Contributing to the metaphor is Henry Feiner's painted backdrop, in shades of brown and charcoal gray Cubist-inspired rendering of vaulting arches bisected by deconstructed hallways and door

frames. Eventually the entire company assumes the unrelenting *marcato* vocabulary as the original eight lyric phrases of slow *developpes*, *panche arabesques*, and grand *ronde jambes en'lair* finally yield to the pulsing symphonic crescendo reaching its climax, sensationally embodying the musical essence in a final dynamic unison sequence.

Rioult enters a dark interior world of impending death in *Prelude to a Night*, which opened the second half of the evening. In lesser hands, this three-movement study of a woman's transitory journey through imagination, dream and nightmare would be a histrionic mess of indulgence. Instead, Penelope Gonzalez — petite in frame, but lithe and steely in muscularity — finds

a dramatic arc that is spot on. The piece opens in the stark, sterile world of a medical ward, full of poking, prodding, physical invasion and clinical opinion. The portrayal of the four male doctors garbed in white lab coats is superbly nuanced, avoiding the trap of stereotyping or generalizing. Such attention to character-driven detail is noticed, for instance, in the formalism of a *demi-plie* in first position in the beat just prior to assuming a frozen standing pose of judgment toward the woman. The second movement takes the woman into a surreal world, her inner demons represented by the company dressed in macabre black sorcerer-like robes and distorted white commedia masks. Again, what could be cliché instead becomes a carefully chiseled scenario of men-

acing edge. In the final section, breathtaking partnering from the four men allows Gonzalez to be airborne for nearly the entire movement. Here she ethereally conveys a cathartic metamorphosis of spirit.

Two uncompromisingly political pieces composed the first half of the program. *Home Front* (2000) is choreographed to Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Although this music ostensibly salutes 18th century French composer Francois Couperin, the word *tombeau* also denotes a piece written in tribute to a departed mentor. Here Ravel, in 1917 himself returning from World War II, dedicates each section to the memory of one of his fallen comrades. Rioult's conceit juxtaposes real time with the memories of three soldiers and three girls left behind. Gestural motifs are particularly effective elements of the storytelling here — the innocence of the young women represented in hands fluttering like butterflies, and the improbably poetic quality seen in the soldiers brushing dust, dirt and death off their uniforms. As the narrative moves forward, Rioult finds the psychological subtext imbedded in the music, and hope, heroism and courage turn sour. The tension at home and abroad become palpable: The sense of disillusionment experienced by the girls is wrenching as is breakdown of solidarity within the young men. Again, Rioult's careful attention to the music catches us off-guard with the unexpectedly lyrical portrayal of the soldiers' violent deaths, a moment eloquently lit by David Finley.

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Wien, choreographed in 1995 to Ravel's *La Valse* (1919) turns the Viennese waltz's revered image of grace, clarity and social refinement inside out, using it as a metaphor to expose the decadence and moral disintegration of a society so self-absorbed as to ignore the path it is paving toward a pending triumphant evil. Six dancers create the illusion of an entire city, moving continuously in a large, circular clockwise path around the perimeter of the stage, alternating portraying villagers being violently swept to humiliation, imprisonment and death, as well as the aristocrats aloof and detached from the horror. The swirling elegance of music is in macabre contrast to the dizzying and whirling images of madness, brutality, rape, the breaking of necks, the violent banging of heads and even the shooting of a gun into the temple. Most brilliant, however, is the fact that no one ever actually waltzes with a partner in this staging — the other is invisible or non-existent — with the exception of an absolutely chilling moment when the partner is a corpse dragged by the arm along the floor amid the toxic frenzy.

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At once disturbing and beautiful, there is an arresting relevance in these works that challenges without apology the moral propriety of current American conflict abroad. Stunningly performed with the highest level of artistry and commitment by this remarkable ensemble, the effect is riveting and uncompromising.

Truly, through his sophisticated re-imagining of the music, Rioult's entire artistic vision clearly is one that boldly asks questions and challenges answers.