

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Alexander Iziliaev

Hot Ballet in Cool Mt. Gretna

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

For thirty years, [Mt. Gretna](#) has been my summertime haven for woods, lake, and music. A Chatauqua community founded in south-central Pennsylvania in the 1890s, it has had its highs and lows as a cultural and recreation center. Since the mid-1970s, when its annual summer art show and [Gretna Music](#) sprang to life, it has seen a revival of activity for those enjoying its play spots; eating ice cream at the iconic Jigger Shop; and attending performances at the Playhouse, lectures at the Community Building, or worship services at the Tabernacle. All this and more, nestled into a lush chestnut- and rhododendron-forest with bicycle trails, playgrounds, and gingerbread houses wrapped in elegantly furnished porches, make the place something of a magical fairyland, a half hour north of Lancaster, just over the Lebanon County line.

Gretna Music has grown from a few dedicated Gretna-area musician-friends playing chamber music together into a festival presenting renowned soloists and ensembles, including Midori, the Audubon Quartet, the Wister Quartet, Jeremy Denk, and jazz artists like Lionel Hampton, Regina Carter, and Tierney Sutton. Once upon a time, performances were every Sunday night throughout the summer, and I looked forward to them all week long as my respite from steamy Lancaster, as my weekly vacation in the woods, and as my return to nature and to music as a seriously appreciated art. The performance schedule has become less regular, and the artists have changed from year to year, but the pleasure of an evening at Gretna remains among my summertime highs. Unfortunately, the years have also seen dwindling audiences, and most of those attending now are in the senior category.

Thus, it was a real joy to see the Playhouse crowded with families, with youngsters of all ages, with people whom I'd never seen before at Gretna. [BalletX](#) brought them there and wowed them. The Gretna folks have experimented with mixing dance into their musical offerings before, including Janet Eilber in the 1990s, the Tamburitians in 2009 and 2013, Flying Lions Dance Company in 2008 and 2012, and members of the Martha Graham Dance Co. under Blakely White-McGuire in 2013. I have no idea if the audience-spill from these dance shows to the music performances is at all significant, but I would love to think it might be.

What BalletX brought to Gretna were four full works, an excerpt of a fifth work as a bonus, ten dancers, and a storm of energy. Christine Cox, BalletX Artistic and Executive Director, introduced the program, explaining that she and co-founder Matthew Neenan were tired of the swan roles featured in Pennsylvania Ballet programs, where they both danced for many years; they yearned instead for more varied and cutting-edge work, where they got to be the first creators of roles. Of course, PAB has never been a swan-only company, with its Balanchine foundations and many contemporary premieres to its credit. But BalletX's record of 60 newly commissioned works in its ten years of existence is one to be proud of, and the selection presented at Gretna shared the flavor of contemporary ballet: barefoot or soft footwear, lots of exposed flesh (never something ballet has been shy about), acrobatic virtuosity, and partnering as complicated as the unfolding of a computer code.

A duet excerpted from Jorma Elo's *Gran Partita*, not listed in our program, was announced by Cox as a gift to the Gretna audience. She also named the dancers: Francesca Forcella and Gary Jeter. The music sounded to me like a baroque opera duet between two women, but more about this piece would be hard to grasp from this excerpt, a difficult and passionate series of entanglements between the dancers. After Cox's announcement for this first work, the dancers remained anonymous, the printed program only stating the number of dancers in each work, not their names. *Slump* (chor. Joshua L. Peugh), the first full piece presented, was a fun romp through adolescent dating, performed to klezmer music, mambo, and Ella Fitzgerald's magical singing. None of the movement seemed particularly connected to the context each music represented, but the colorful costumes and zany movement encounters, along with plenty of facial mugging, drew laughs and engaged the audience fully. *It's Not a Cry*, a duet to a rendition of the ever-popular "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen, displayed the complicated partnering of contemporary ballet, but choreographer Amy Seiwart made time for stillness, for pause and breath, which I found a welcome respite from the ongoing rush of the program as a whole.

After intermission, Neenan's *Show Me* brought the full cast of ten dancers onto the stage in varied groupings, all seemingly driven by finger movements—biting a forefinger, pointing, splaying, wriggling, and grabbing. Oddly, the musical credit for this dance identified all the works as "songs," although the selections were all instrumental (and did not include the Beethoven String Quartet listed among the other pieces). Given Gretna's musically astute audience, this *faux pas* struck me as unfortunate. The evening closed with Cayetano Soto's *Malasangre*, with seven dancers fully invested in the looney musicality of La Lupe's songs (yes, these *were* songs).

The dancers performed at 100+% commitment and capacity, which Gretna's intimate stage and seating permitted the audience to fully enjoy. And they did. Central PA audiences are always generous, but the spontaneity of the standing ovation that greeted the close of this show was testament to the genuine enthusiasm of these spectators for BalletX's high-energy, contemporary ballet work.

Ballet X, Mt. Gretna Playhouse, Sept. 3.

By Lynn Matluck Brooks
September 7, 2016