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AUDACITY OF DANCE

Benjamin Millepied and Alexander Tharaud: “Unstill Life”

Place: Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, California, April 9, 2024

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If there's anybody who embodies 'rizz'—charisma in today's coolspeak—it's dancer, choreographer, and filmmaker Benjamin Millepied. And he brought it to the audience at Walt Disney Concert Hall in a one-night performance with pianist Alexandre Tharaud. Dubbed, “Unstill Life,” which premiered in Lyon, France in 2023, the 70-minute intermissionless work was produced by Millepied's L.A. Dance Project (and also made possible by the Van Cleef & Arpels Fund for LADP), and marked his return to the stage after a prolonged absence.



Benjamin Millepied and Alexandre Tharaud in “Unstill Life.” Photograph by Farah Sosa for the LA Philharmonic

The good news is that French-born Millepied hasn't lost a step. The even better news is that the bromance between him and Tharaud proved a deliriously ebullient romp, making the evening a stand-out on all counts. Indeed, the concert began with Millepied, seemingly ego-less, warming up on stage before Tharaud took to the piano and played Rameau's “Suite en La, RCT 5.”

A series of dances filled with precise rhythmic ornamentations and tossed off with a flourish –by both pianist and terpsichore–this was a seven-part Baroque feast. Millepied, in a fetching dark blue muscle tee and dance pants–costumes by Camille Assaf–traversed the stage with avian-like swooping arms that sculpted the air, whipping turns, and yes, some casually executed fouettés. And even though there weren't 32 of the moves that were first deployed and made famous in "Swan Lake" in the 1890s, it was obvious Millepied was having a ball, ending his gambits on the floor and looking like a snow angel, sans the white stuff.

In order for the dancing dude to catch his breath, we were then treated to a film featuring short bios of the performers (in French with subtitles): As it happens, Tharaud had wanted to become a dancer, while Millepied dreamed of being a pianist! Ahh, such synchronicity: Their respective stories oozed charm and made the perfect transition to Erik Satie's "Gnossiennes Nos. 3 & 5, as well as the Velvet Gentleman's "Pièces Froides: Danses de Travers, I."



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Enigmatic (Satie, himself, made up the title, "Gnossienne"), yet lovely and somewhat haunting, the music suited both dancer and accompanist, with Millepied doing a bit of strutting while also being videotaped in real time by Sebastien Marcovici. A thoughtful use of the medium, these images, including close-ups of splayed fingers, gave an air of intimacy to the 2,265-seat hall. (Also credited in the production were artistic collaborator Olivier Simola, dramaturge Loïc Barrère and lighting designer Masha Tsimring.)

To the sounds of a scratchy recording of Bach being played on an old-fashioned phonograph and seen on film, Millepied forayed into the master's Partita No. 2 in C minor. Prancing and attacking his moves with the visceral quality emblematic of an artist unafraid to lay bare his emotions, he pirouetted around the stage one moment, was in arabesque mode the next: Here was Millepied embracing what could only be called, the "audacity of dance," his articulated footwork, whether moving forward or back, as a form of liberation.

When Tharaud got up from his piano bench and walked across the stage to meet his comrade in art, the journey continued: Tharaud, sashaying and clad in a blue suit, looked as free as Millepied, who, at one point, lifted his colleague (caution: artists at play), their ease with one another apparent. The joy in this physical realm was perfect counterpoint to the more cerebral world of the music.

One wondered: Would Millepied next sit at the piano, or live vicariously through Tharaud instead? It was the latter, of course, as the ballerino, now wielding a video camera, shot close-ups of the musician's hands, his fingers, their duet of camaraderie, their true bonhomie, examples of the power of art, the beauty of trust.



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Why not, then, throw in a little Schubert? "4 Impromptus," to be exact, "No. 3" and "No. 2." While the music was played as it was written, i.e., there was no improvising, Millepied, on the other hand—or foot, as the case may be—seemed to be creating on the spot, he was that relaxed. Lying on the floor, it was as if he were blessing the Marley, giving every ounce, every inch of himself in the process.

When the dancer put his head in his hands and then on the piano, as well as hugging Tharaud, respect seemed to reverberate throughout the space. If it seemed a tad, well, corny, at times, so be it. This was old-fashioned ballet in a new format, with no AI in sight. Millepied, watching his colleague give himself up to Schubert via runs and arpeggios, then did likewise, becoming a whirling dervish in the process, his body a vessel.

With Beethoven's immensely difficult Piano Sonata No. 32 ending the program—and Tharaud completely up to the task—Millepied appeared to be channeling the musical master, his arms frenzied, his moves jagged, before he raced up the stairs in the Hall, Marcovici trailing him. One might think this was a bit hubristic, trite, even, but no! Here, the unexpected flight of fancy in this cathedral of music was in keeping with Millepied's philosophy of making use of the space, as he'd done with his "Romeo and Juliet," performed at the Hall in 2018.



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Back on stage again, the dancer's arms came to rest at his chest—his heart chakra—as he thanked us, the audience, with, perhaps, a nod to Beethoven, and, of course, to Tharaud, and, ultimately, a merci pour la danse. But this, as is true with many a Beethoven work, was a false ending, as Millepied continued to move, leaping, spinning and slicing through the air like a comet before coming back down to earth.

With an encore expected, the pair obliged with "La Vie en Rose." As Tharaud played the song made famous by Édith Piaf, with Millepied taking a last whirl on the stage, one couldn't help but be thankful for the generosity of these artists, for their 70 minutes of sublime splendor, giving us a respite from the world's conflicts and pain, and ultimately allowing us to see, "life in rosy hues."

And pourquoi pas, as they say, "Why not?"