

July 11, 2000

DANCE REVIEW; New From Ireland and Back From Brazil at Jacob's Pillow Festival

By JACK ANDERSON

Thanks to choreographic magic, audiences at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival could travel from Ireland to Brazil on Saturday without leaving the Berkshire Hills.

The Dublin-based CoisCeim Dance Theater, the first Irish troupe to appear at the festival, performed in the afternoon in the Doris Duke Studio Theater. Grupo Corpo Brazilian Dance Theater, one of last year's festival successes, was the attraction on Saturday night in the Ted Shawn Theater. The theatrical journeys were worth taking.

CoisCeim, founded in 1995, aroused special interest because it is almost totally unknown in the United States. Its name, pronounced "KUSH-came," derives from an Irish word meaning "footstep."

David Bolger, its director and choreographer, offered "Ballads," an hourlong work inspired by a bleak period in Irish history: the great famine, which began in 1845 and lasted for nearly six years. A million people died and a half-million emigrated.

Without literally re-enacting historical events, the choreography reflected the period, yet also made one recall times of tribulation the world over. One of Mr. Bolger's major themes was the difference between learning about and living through the agonies of history.

The stage was dominated by books. Near the start of the production, a woman walked through darkness reading a book that glowed, thanks to Paul Keogan's deft lighting designs. At various times pages of books descended on the stage like falling snow. Dancers used piles of books as pedestals and stools. At one point they kept stacking books ever higher, pausing only to place an outstretched woman on them as if on a bier. Then books and woman toppled to the ground in chaos.

If the books symbolized history, the dancers represented people bearing the weight of history. Although one sequence had lively steps recalling folk dancing, most of the choreography was grim and heavy-footed. Dancers often marched in slow processions evoking funerals, religious rites and trudges into exile. When some dancers brusquely rejected others, the actions suggested political oppression. In the most impressive scene, dancers desperately sought to keep a huge tilting board from falling, as if they were emigrants trying to prevent a storm-tossed ship from foundering.

The accompaniment combined taped sounds by a collaborative known as Bell Helicopter with live cello music by Diane O'Keeffe and Irish pipe and whistle music by Martin Nolan. Sometimes their tunes recalled melancholy Irish ballads. Other music sounded appropriately atmospheric although not specifically Irish, for Mr. Bolger was concerned with hardship throughout the world as well as in Ireland.

Because a few choreographic images did not appear to have completely crystallized, there were moments when people did little more than plod glumly about. But most of "Ballads" had a melancholy beauty, and it was dramatically danced by Muirne Bloomer, Benjamin Dunks, Anne Gilpin, Robert Jackson, Simone Litchfield and Ms. O'Keeffe, who is a dancer as well as a musician and who occasionally treated her cello as a dancing partner.

Grupo Corpo, which is based in Belo Horizonte, was its usual exuberant self. Once again three brothers helped create its attractive offerings. Rodrigo Pederneiras is the choreographer. Paulo Pederneiras, the company's artistic director, designs its scenery in collaboration with Fernando Velloso. And Pedro Pederneiras is the stage manager.

The program included "Parabelo," the hit of the troupe's engagement last summer, and the United States premiere of "Benguele," a progression from tropical languor to exuberant giddiness to recorded music by Joao Bosco.

In some ways, presenting these creations together caused the evening to suffer from a structural sameness. Both works were vigorous plotless ensembles that set all 19 members of the well-disciplined company moving, usually as a unit and only rarely as individuals. One wondered what these dancers might be like in dance-dramas or introspective pieces. But their sense of freedom and fluidity in the upper body was impressive. And there was a surprise.

What initially appeared to be a black backdrop suddenly became transparent, revealing a level above the stage on which dancers moved in a seemingly endless line. Then some returned to the stage, leaving others still on the upper level. The steady stream of bodies moving one way or another could conceivably be interpreted as symbolizing the passage of time. Less allegorically minded viewers could simply admire the visual effect.

Photo: CoisCeim Dance Theater of Dublin performing "Ballads." (Alan E. Solomon for The New York Times)