

Washington Post

Washington Ballet's "The Great Gatsby"

By Sarah Kaufman

The first bit of action in Septime Webre's "The Great Gatsby" is the emergence of the jazz band, rising on a lift from the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater's orchestra pit, the tuba and string bass glowing under the lights like oil lamps.

It's fitting that vocalist E. Faye Butler and the six musicians of Billy Novick's Blue Syncopators receive such a prominent introduction, because they are the starring attraction of this production, which the Washington Ballet reprised Thursday after its February 2010 premiere. It is the music — vintage selections by Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Irving Berlin and more — that not only sets the mood for each scene but contributes to the emotional and dramatic tension, helps define the characters and distinguishes one episode from another. This is helpful because the choreography, lively and acrobatic as it is, doesn't tell us much about the story.

This is not to say that "The Great Gatsby" isn't entertaining — it is. There is no lack of energy here. These '20s do more than roar: As Webre has envisioned the era, and as the dancers embody it, it swoops and thunders with a force to just about knock the breath from your lungs. There is tipsy music, highly physical dancing and a charismatic narrator (Will Gartshore, also an occasional singer with the band) who strolls on to paraphrase or recite verbatim from the F. Scott Fitzgerald masterpiece.

But if a faithful rendering or even a choice distillation of the novel is what you're looking for, you may find the combined effect of the elements disjointed. It is an effort to reconcile wholly different expressions. It's not the clash of spoken word and dance that is jarring; it's the awkward fit of the dancers' jolly, pell-mell careening with a poignant, deeply romantic story steeped in melancholy.

"It is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams," Gartshore tells us, "that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men." And then the dancers tumble on looking like the bright, comedic cast of "Thoroughly Modern Millie" — in other words, same time period, different world.

Although in tone and tempo the dancing is at odds with the story, it nonetheless amounts to a heady show of fireworks. The work powers up with three virtuosic male solos — Jared Nelson as the eternal dreamer Gatsby, pining for his lost love, Daisy Buchanan; Jonathan Jordan as youthful newcomer Nick Carraway; and Brooklyn Mack as George Wilson, a gruff working man who becomes ensnared in Gatsby's love triangle. No jump, twist or turn in the male ballet vocabulary is left out of these displays, although the picture of where the characters fit into the story is less clear.

There is a clever romp on a sofa among Daisy (Emily Ellis), her husband Tom (Luis Torres), their friend Jordan (Maki Onuki) and Nick. In her show-stopping solo in a phone booth, Sona Kharatian — as Myrtle Wilson, George's wife and Tom's mistress — puts the vamp in vampiress. You know that no association with those curves and that will is going to end well — yet when it doesn't, the ballet achieves its finest

moment. Webre has fine-tuned the ending, and Nelson, whose exceedingly well-executed Gatsby is the most complete character, delivers a final solo as heartbreaking as it is rigorously unadorned. Here, "The Great Gatsby" finally comes together.

Performances continue through Sunday, with cast changes.