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DANCE REVIEW

Music, sculpture and dance meld in 'Foreign Bodies'

The performance at the Hollywood Bowl is the rare moment that can define the city's art.

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DIABOLO Dance Theater has always worked with sculptural units larger than the human body that not only establish specific conditions for movement but make statements about our relationship to the world.

A staircase pierced by trapdoors, an enormous wheel, a rocking, ship-like platform: Such structures not only inspire choreographer and company director Jacques Heim but add an element of risk and genuine heroism to the performances of the company's 10 dancers.

However, Diavolo has never had a set-sculpture as mutable in shape and potent in metaphoric possibilities as the metallic cube packed with hidden pieces that was designed and engineered for its latest project by Tina Trefethen. And Diavolo has never had a score as sizzling and often overwhelming as "Foreign Bodies," composed at the beginning of this century by Esa-Pekka Salonen, music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Heim and Diavolo, Salonen and the Phil, Trefethen and her cube all came together for the first time Tuesday at the Hollywood Bowl, with everybody out for blood and the result one of those rare events that define the art of this city when the levels of vision and support are equally exceptional.

You could view the Diavolo component of "Foreign Bodies" as sheer spectacle: dancers turning that cube into a pyramid, three pyramids, a wall, three walls, a bridge and a labyrinth while leaping from peak to peak, rolling down the sides, slithering in and out of every aperture and balancing, unafraid, as various pieces collapsed underneath them.

You could also see the one-act piece as a life-cycle set in dangerous times, with sections abstracting a sense of communal birth, the discovery of prowess, of sex, aggression, a sense of the landscape changing too fast and our environment literally pushing us around. Sound familiar? (Film at 11.)

Trefethen's cube may have looked a mite out of place Tuesday -- a square egg in a round Bowl -- and Heim's Michelangelesque body sculpture will make a stronger effect in a conventional theater. But Salonen's score and the orchestra's playing kept "Foreign Bodies" at a towering scale, and the superheated edge of it demanded the kind of multidisciplinary contemporary movement that breaks rules -- Diavolo movement.

After intermission, a different kind of life-cycle (danceless this time) occupied Salonen

and the Philharmonic: Gustav Mahler's mighty Symphony No. 1 in D. As performed without the smaller-scale "Blumine" section (which the composer discarded early in the work's history), it begins as a sad memory of simpler times (and simpler symphonies), with a little military-style fanfare off in the distance eventually becoming monstrous, shattering.

Salonen's interpretation passionately embraced the chaos in the score, especially in the third movement, when several different orchestras seemed at war, determined to interrupt and dominate.

From the first, the Bowl sound system failed him: The high strings at the opening pretty much evaporated in the night air, and the rich tone needed for some of the most expansive passages proved unavailable from the Cahuenga Pass loudspeakers. But the energy and precision of the playing made the order and disorder in the music powerfully pertinent.

Just like "Foreign Bodies" (the score and the choreography), Mahler's First is about the disintegration of stability, about a journey we haven't chosen, about learning to dance on an unsteady floor. Grace under pressure is no longer possible: It's a constant race to keep from being obliterated. Take comfort in whatever warmth you find on the run -- as Diavolo's Crystal and David Zibalese do in a few, scattered "Foreign Bodies" intimacies and as a few snatches of Viennese waltzes suggest here and there in the Mahler. And maybe art -- concert music, concert dance -- can help brace us against whatever war, pestilence, storm and injustice have in store. It sure seemed that way Tuesday at the Hollywood Bowl.

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