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**DANCE** | DANCE REVIEW

## Leaping From Within, Narratives of a Young Ensemble

BalletCollective Performs at the Skirball Center

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY OCT. 30, 2014



Members of BalletCollective performing the world premiere of Troy Schumacher's "All That We See," at the Skirball Center. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

The worlds created by [BalletCollective](#) are mint-fresh. They feel both attuned to life outside the performing arts and to the interior lives of the performers.

The group's director, Troy Schumacher, has been working unlike most ballet choreographers for several years. The norm is to begin making dances within and for established companies; a rare few manage later to establish companies that they shape to their specifications. But back in 2010, Mr. Schumacher — now 28 and a corps dancer with New York City Ballet (for which he created his first piece this September) — set up BalletCollective.

Though its dancers are members of City Ballet, they show new facets with this smaller ensemble: They're more vulnerable, more ardent. Artists of several other genres are involved. In the performances I've witnessed, the music — by the composer and music director [Ellis Ludwig-Leone](#) and played live — makes an especially exciting contribution.

In August 2103, when the Joyce Theater presented a season of six small American ballet companies in two weeks, BalletCollective was the most advanced example of a youthful new voice, not least with the world premiere of Mr. Schumacher's "[The Impulse Wants Company.](#)" On Wednesday, it opened a two-night run at the Skirball Center at New York University, with that work being joined by two world premieres.

The chamber group [Hotel Elefant](#) makes Mr. Ludwig-Leone's scores vividly atmospheric. The various string instruments produce sounds ranging from rustling to plucked, and from singing lines to pulsating rhythms that suggest now folk, now jazz. The pianist makes drumlike percussive effects during "The Impulse"; in the closing of "[All That We See,](#)" a saxophone adds striking sonorities, while an electric guitar subtly changes the texture.

"The Impulse Wants Company" uses all of the group's seven dancers. Two of them, Ashley Laracey and Mr. Schumacher, dance one of the world premieres, the pas de deux "[Dear and Blackbirds,](#)" to music for string quartet, and the other five — Lauren King, Claire Kretzschmar, Meagan Mann, David Prottas and Taylor Stanley — perform the other, "All That We See." Each piece proceeds like fragments of suspenseful narrative: The dancers appear to discover themselves and one another as they go along.

The group dances make some use of formal geometries, but the overall look is remarkably informal. Structures throughout are loose and flexible; each dance is presented as a series of separate incidents. Rhythms and phrasing are continually changing; the action is frequently interrupted by walking, gestures, gazes. The dancing comes out of a larger context and keeps returning to it.

The solos, duets and group numbers of the larger pieces, "The Impulse" and "All That We See," contain imagery and phrases that are like nothing I've seen in ballet. Several of these salient incidents feature Mr. Stanley, a dancer whose multifaceted stage character has both an animal force and a questing human urgency.

In "All That We See," a brief duet for him and the more authoritative, equally vital Mr. Prottas, is an intimate drama of mutual attraction; it has no particular sexual charge, but becomes a give-and-take colloquy of real intensity.

There are marvelous solos throughout. Mr. Stanley has a circuit of turning jumps in "The Impulse" that you follow not as conventional bravura but as a thought process, as if he were working through something.

Ms. Kretzschmar has a dance in “All That We See” where she keeps trying out balance, not as if trying to sustain it, but rather as if testing how to fall out of it. Ms. Mann just travels onto the stage, with her back to the audience, on point in bourrées. It’s a standard step, but here, very simply done, it acquires a special magic.

The “Dear and Blackbirds” pas de deux illustrates Mr. Schumacher’s instinct for drama. This boy-girl love duet is the most conventional number of the program (lights fall on what we assume is their first kiss), and it’s studded with several conventional images of need: Here he presses his cheek to her hand, there she embraces his waist. But the dances keep the scene fresh, sometimes coexisting in parallel soliloquies, and often with a conversational immediacy, proceeding like question and answer, mutually responsive. Ms. Laracey, a beautiful dancer, and Mr. Schumacher make it very touching.

I have some reservations. The dances’ phrases seldom build to a sustained continuity or momentum. Seldom do the women project with the amplitude that ballet can particularly give the female form. There’s too much emphasis on adolescent naïveté. But the immediacy of the dancers is terrific, and the musicality of the choreography has real intricacy.

Each dance leaves an impression of secret complexity. Program notes tell us that “The Impulse” and “Dear and Blackbirds” have grown from source poems by [Cynthia Zarin](#). “All That We See” is based on art by [David Salle](#). This information is almost distracting, leading us to wonder if we can’t “get” these dances unless we know this source material.

In fact, all of Mr. Schumacher’s work stands on its own. I don’t feel the need to know his inspiration as much as I simply want to see these dances again.

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