

Ballets Jazz: a spirited show

Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal
SUB Theatre
November 12, 13, 14

by Rosa Jackson

True to their reputation, Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal provided some spectacular entertainment at SUB Theatre with their latest production.

This company is known for its high spirits and professionalism, and with its latest production it fulfilled these expectations and more.

The first piece, "Appearances," was intriguing. The long black evening dresses which the women wore turned out to be the most versatile costumes I've ever seen. With each transition in the dance, the dresses were converted into different articles of clothing: capes, veils, and pants to name a few.

"Appearances" could be described as a very classy striptease. With the sensuousness which characterizes Les Ballets Jazz, the women's dresses were gradually removed to reveal red sequined bodysuits. The male dancers, dressed in 40s style suits, added a great deal to this highly polished piece.

The next piece, "Libertango," seemed to be an extension of the mood of the first. Once again the dancers seemed cool and reserved, and I began to wonder, when are they going to let loose? But that was to come later.

"Libertango" was an elaboration on the tango, composed of several short pieces. The

most remarkable thing about this number was how well the dancers worked in couples and in groups. The dancing was flowing and almost perfectly synchronized.

Following "Libertango" was "After," a piece "inspired by the panic that gripped the world after the Chernobyl explosion", as the program said. This piece provided a definite change and atmosphere, and to my mind was the most interesting. Sacha Belinsky and Natalie Eickhoff, the soloists in this piece, both gave powerful performances. At the end of the piece, Belinsky was symbolically "wrapped in plastic and tossed on the rubbish heap."

"Big Band" was a light-hearted, energetic ending to the production. The dancers demonstrated their skill with stunning lifts, jumps, and turns. This piece was an opportunity for them to show off their talent and training, and the enthusiastic audience loved it.

Les Ballets Jazz was appropriately named, because although the dancing was jazz, the show brought to mind a ballet. The dancers remained detached from the audience; even when they displayed emotion, they seemed to be acting. However, this added a theatrical quality to the performance which was appealing.

My only criticism of the show was its lack of unity. Because the dancers took bows after every piece, and because there were two intermissions, the production became somewhat fragmented. Nonetheless, it was well worth seeing.



Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal at SUB

Photo Paul Menzies

Avant-garde guitarists

by Mike Spindloe

The Yardbird Suite plays host on Tuesday, November 17th to a truly rare Edmonton performance by guitarists Fred Friih and Hans Reichel. Both have been active in the area of progressive, avant-garde, experimental music—labels are difficult to pin on these guys—for a number of years. Between them, they have worked with a veritable who's who of, well, whatever exactly it is that they do, and while the credits might not mean much unless your musical tastes tend to lean pretty far out of the mainstream, a selective summary appears scattered throughout this article.

More interesting, however, are the creative directions which Friih and Reichel, both independently and during previous collaborations, have chosen to explore. The German-born Reichel is perhaps the less well-known of the two on our continent, but he shares with Friih a highly developed and often bizarre sense of the guitar as much more than the standard instrument we're all familiar with.

Since 1970, Reichel has been building his own guitars: guitars with as many as 23 strings and four necks, guitars without bodies, kotolike guitars without necks, special capos (a device used to alter the tuned pitch of the strings), guitars without frets and so on. A biography describes his playing style as incorporating "subtle lyrics" to the other conventions and unconventions of improvisation. His recorded work, mostly on the German independent Free Music label, includes eight albums to date. There are also collaborations with Friih (among others), and contributions to records by many other German avant-garde artists.

Friih's recorded output, on the other hand, is staggering in comparison, and continues to grow rapidly. Compiling a list would be a hefty task; but briefly, it began with the English band Henry Cow, who combined free improvisation with rock

structures of varying cohesion over six albums, and Friih's three volume solo "Guitar Solos" series. Between 1978-81, he made three albums with Henry Cow compatriots Dagmar Krause and Chris Cutler under the name Art Bears, experimenting with short song structures.

Later work includes two albums by his group Skeleton Crew, as well as more solo albums, numerous collaborative efforts, guest appearances and production jobs—all well outside the mainstream. Friih's latest LP is a collaboration with guitarists Richard Thompson and Henry Kaiser and former Captain Beefheart drummer John French, entitled "Live, Love, Lari and Loaf."

Friih's style could be described as a systematic deconstruction of conventional guitars and guitar playing. As part of his independent two-handed playing style, he began laying the guitar on a table to play and then "gradually realized that if I was going to lay the guitars out flat then the guitar itself was becoming less and less relevant. The only important things were a set of resonating strings and the position of the pick-ups."

Like Reichel, Friih has gone to great lengths in experimentation, such as dispensing with the guitar neck completely to concentrate on different possibilities. To this end he has also been known to use a wide variety of common and not-so-common household devices to obtain the required resonance of strings.

The music of both Fred Friih and Hans Reichel has some developmental roots in rock but both musicians have not only eschewed the demands of commercialism but also aspire to break away from the "conventions" of improvisation. The success of their musical experiments is subject to variation and their effects on listeners are highly subjective. Their Yardbird suite appearance Tuesday is a rare one indeed and should be well worth checking out.



Local band first to play trio kazoo instrumental at Yardbird

Alley Scatz trio: wow!

Alley Scatz
Yardbird Suite

sincere raving by Mike Spindloe

Alley Scatz opened their two night stand at the Yardbird Suite last weekend to a full and enthusiastic house ready and willing to respond to their invigorating mix of jazz standards, show tunes and torch songs. And the group didn't disappoint, serving up a three set helping of nostalgia with all the trimmings.

This generous and well-paced menu included selections from Motown's early years, Irving Berlin, Gershwin, Duke Ellington and a host of others, but it was Alley Scatz' fine treatment of the songs which brought them fully to life.

Barbara Leah Meyer, Jacee Dallyn and Kelly Collins are all individually accomplished singers. Together they demonstrated the full range of harmonies demanded by their intricate arrangements with often stunning precision. All three showed versatility and character in their singing. One high point was definitely Jacee Dallyn's demonstration of an upper register that

would be the envy of a piccolo player.

Providing fine support was the band led by Bruce Mahaosy on piano, with Richard King on bass guitar and Tom Foster on drums. An intelligent mix kept the vocal harmonies out from where they belonged, except during infrequent instrumental solos, mostly by Bruce Mahaosy.

The overall presentation was complemented by some casual-looking but obviously well-rehearsed choreography that leaned towards theatricality rather than chorus-line style. Here more spontaneity would be welcome, but the energy flowing from the stage was easily evident, and the visuals were still polished and entertaining.

The group added some humour to the set with their version of the Andrews Sisters' "Bei Mir Bist Du Schon," during which they donned sunglasses, and tuned up their tenor kazos for the first trio kazoo instrumental break ever heard at the Yardbird Suite.

When Alley Scatz closed out the last set with a rousing rendition of "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," it was a satisfying conclusion to a toe-tapping and often magical evening of musical entertainment.

Commercials galore

1987 Cannes Commercials
Princess Theatre
November 13-22

review by Elaine Ostry

A whole movie of commercials? What kind of draw is that? You can see them on T.V. anytime; no one watches them anyway.

But the commercials of the 34th International Advertising Film Festival in Cannes are a cut above the everyday Midas specials. In fact, they are fascinating; you don't notice the time going by. A good number of them were from Britain, France and Japan. You see the "Bronze Lions," the "Silver Lions," "Gold Lions" and the Grand Prix winner.

Most of the commercials are funny, some are serious, but all of them are artistic, even ingenious. Commercial artists create a world in which anything can happen: statues become alive, a pair of pants starts dancing by itself, and little plasticine grapes donning sunglasses get down to "Heard It Through the Grapevine."

A lot of the humour comes not just from hi-tech design but from human foibles. One of my favourites features a man and a woman eating mounds of fruit a la 9 1/2 Weeks and Tom Jones. But the whole romantic image collapses when the woman smiles—and bits of food are stuck in between her teeth. Immediately the scene switches to show the product advertised: a box of toothpicks.

Some of the commercials are not at all humorous, as they are advertisements campaigning against apartheid, a nuclear power station, drugs, and the spread of AIDS.

The inclusion of these serious spots demonstrates the extent to which commercials can manipulate your emotions. Everyone is laughing at one commercial, and then the next one silences the whole theatre, and the next commercial makes everyone laugh again. The switches from serious to funny are very quick, dramatic and effective. And, of course, one's capacity for sentimentality is tapped with the usual pictures of family joy, including cute kids and kittens.

Some of the commercials from other nations advertise products that we don't usually see advertised on T.V., such as newspapers, magazines and toothpicks. Sometimes the total effect of the commercial was so artistic that one lost sight of whatever product was being sold. It was also a little irritating that some of the Asian commercials had no subtitles.

But altogether, the 1987 Cannes Commercials are very entertaining. They require no effort at all to watch, as there is no plot to follow, and your attention span never needs to be longer than three minutes per spot. They make a great escape from the pressures of school: an escape to a glibly world in which everyone is gorgeous and the bizarre is in reach.