Not enough of the 'wow' factor

Ismene Brown is only half convinced by New York City Ballet's selection of works at the Playhouse

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THE wow factor is a rare thing in a new ballet and in his latest work, Polyphonia, on New York City Ballet's second programme, the young British choreographer Christopher Wheeldon at last showed why he justifies the fuss about him.

To an arresting (and not frighteningly avant-garde) collage of Gyorgy Ligeti's music for two pianos, Wheeldon invents an electrifying string of short dances for the eight performers that tilts, bends and remoulds ballet, expressively and without contortion.

A piano study called Desordre (Disorder) elicits a pleasing opening parade of almost mathematical order for the four indigo-clad couples, the women's needle-sharp legs emphasised and complicated by sharp, geometric shadows behind them. Then, in the first of several extraordinary pas de deux, Jock Soto, the company's barrel-chested strong-man, picks up the fabulous young Carla Korbes and starts folding and unfolding her narrow, fine limbs with the care of a jeweller sculpting gold wire. Spiky one minute, shimmeringly mysterious the next, the 10 concise sections become a brooding frieze of ballet images, leaving you avid for more. Polyphonia was much the brightest light of what has been a realistically grey week spent watching NYCB's alternatives to its scintillating core repertory of Balanchine.

The second programme also held the only other dance with "wow", William Forsythe's Herman Schmerman pas de deux. This is a turbo-charged duet for a wary, powerful woman (in a see-through Versace vest) and a clever, wheedling man that postures like crazy and yet unfolds with hilarious truth into a sudden classical finish that stops the breath. Statuesque Monique Meunier and mercurial Albert Evans were as good as it gets.

For the rest, Peter Martins, NYCB's balletmaster, over-exposed himself with five ballets out of the 13, of which even the best, Jeu de Cartes (1992), to the captivating score Stravinsky composed for Balanchine in 1937, still could not rise from brisk classroom exercise to the realm of art.

An Angelin Preljocaj piece, opening the third night, showed glimpses of the secretive eroticism that the Frenchman can generate in his odd hybrids of ballet and contemporary-cum-folk dance. La Stravaganza, made in 1997, had a piquant theme of a

fantasy meeting across centuries between the sexes, with Vivaldi and electronic sound cunningly reversed to heighten the sense of outlandishness. The contrast between liberated modern steps and corseted baroque ones hasn't had long enough in the oven, but eventually we get an enticing climax, a sort of sexual alien abduction.

Those three apart, the week offered politeness (Richard Tanner, Miriam Mahdaviani and Lynne Taylor-Corbett) or brashness (Martins and Ulysses Dove). Praiseworthy as Martins is for encouraging so much choreographic activity, I doubt he allows others (or himself) enough time to focus and deepen their creative ideas.

Next time NYCB would do better to select work that is not labelled "old", as at Edinburgh last year, or "new", as this year - but just plain good.

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