

Big Boi's 'Big' a big success despite little missteps

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As speakers thump out driving beats and men in too-baggy clothes strut around the stage, shoulders hunched, microphones to mouths, one has to wonder: this is ballet? Pinch yourself; the tutus are there, too. So are the guys in tights, the taut athletic bodies and plenty of high legs and pointed toes.

If it sounds disconnected, it is. The pacing is off, and abrupt set changes are often the only transition between live hip-hop and pre-recorded orchestral music. But "big" is also a fascinating and surreal journey, a storybook of the absurd complete with flying dancers, mythical characters and even a tutu-clad, moon-walking hip-hop diva.

Like the title suggests, the successful fusion of ballet and hip-hop is no small task. Collaborators Antwan "Big Boi" Patton, half of Atlanta's legendary hip-hop duo Outkast, and Atlanta Ballet resident choreographer Lauri Stallings came to the project intending to find common ground. The hope was to create neither ballet nor hip-hop but a new form of entertainment, "wholly fresh and original" says Atlanta Ballet Artistic Director John McFall.

Conceptually, "big" is original. Major ballet companies have danced to popular music in the past, but Patton's presence onstage and his interactions with the dancers seems unprecedented. Local musical talents Sleepy Brown, C-Bone, Rock D, Khujo Goodie and Janelle Monáe join Patton as they alternately move through the dancers, becoming part of the landscape.

Monáe takes her artistic contribution a step further in the night's standout piece "fly the bird bath." The silky-voiced singer dances a duet with Tara Lee, the muse and soloist of "big." Lee's role is a bit ambiguous, but the contrast is hilarious. Monáe's "Sincerely Jane" is a rousing yet soulful song full of rhythmic bursts she highlights with kicks or a mocked ballet posture.

Surprisingly, Stallings' choreography for the scenes involving local children and untrained ballet dancers is largely more imaginative than her choreography for the company. In "Bombs," Stallings does just that, rendering the high energy hip-hop classic "Bombs Over Baghdad" powerless by juxtaposing the music with sleepy barre-like exercises.

The first half, titled "Chapter One," is choreographically shaky with two pieces, "Aluminum" and "Blanco," plagued by poor staging and not enough rehearsals. Though Big Boi and Sleepy Brown provide a wealth of rhythmic and melodic gems in "Morris Brown" and "I Can't Wait," Stallings' choreography doesn't live

up to the music. Too many company members crowd the stage behind the singers, and the stiff movement is awkward. One can't help but think of backup dancers in a music video gone wrong.

Chapter Two is a refreshing change. Starting with "The begin," set to Thomas Newman's soaring "End Title," the choreography is more grounded and the dancers are relaxed and focused. The section is evocative of mystery and grandiosity, a Cirque du Soleil-esque tone heightened by the presence of a dancer suspended 20 feet in the air, video images projected on her long white skirt.

A unison section near the end is impressive as the huge cast (including children) moves with purpose. Every dancer changes direction quickly, falling to the floor with ease then jumping up again. One wonders why this exciting choreography and performance intensity was missing in earlier sections and why those dancers stuck in a rigid ballet rut suddenly found a way out.

Despite a few missteps, "big" is big success. The presence of live music is a breath of fresh air for the Atlanta Ballet, which has been dancing to recorded music, and even when the choreography falls short, Big Boi's lively sounds keep it entertaining. A multimedia extravaganza, "big" fulfills its name and fills the seats. Now if we could just see Big Boi in some tights.