

Lively 'Room,' new home

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DANCE REVIEW

Atlanta Ballet's "In the Upper Room"

2 p.m., 8 p.m. today; 2 p.m., 7 p.m. Sunday; \$16-\$86. Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre, 2800 Cobb Galleria Parkway, Atlanta. 770-916-2800, 404-249-6400; www.cobbenergycentre.com.

Atlanta Ballet dancers proved themselves worthy of both artistic and athletic praise after Thursday night's performance of the relentless "In the Upper Room." Choreographed by Twyla Tharp in 1986, the work is physically demanding — loaded with turns, lifts and jumps — and exhausting even for the audience.

Set to the driving music of Philip Glass, the choreography mimics percussive rhythms and a soaring melody line. Dancers in white sneakers emerge from a covering of fog as three red-shoed ballerinas — Peng-Yu Chen, Tara Lee and Kelsey Yip — skim the floor.

The soloist role is Chen's best this season as her small body seems built for the fast, balletic choreography. Especially exciting are the frequent and daring duets danced by Lee and Yip.

Tharp is known for her seamless blending of classical ballet steps with contemporary movement. But the company is not well-versed in the latter, and the dancers not in ballet shoes often look stiff and uncomfortable.

Despite a valiant effort, mistakes peppered the "Upper Room" performance. Adjusting to a new space and fatigue may have contributed to missed lifts, a collision and often sloppy unison. Newcomer Daniel Mayo is a welcome exception, shifting from sharp ballet technique to more freeform movement with ease.

Balanchine's classic ballet "Serenade" was impeccably performed by female company members. The unison movement is well-rehearsed and a

beautiful expression of Tchaikovsky's score. Costumes are icy blue with a sheer skirt revealing the powerful lines of the legs.

In contrast to the sometimes soulless perfection of "Serenade" was the theatrical crowd pleaser "Ramblin' Suite." The costumes are a major distraction: Think attending a hoe-down in an '80s style tie-dye bathing suit. Though the music — bluegrass by the Red Clay Ramblers — was catchy and fun, the piece is a jumble of unrelated ideas. The dancers are committed to their characters, but again their strict ballet training does not allow for the gritty, loose quality inherent in the music genre.

An exception is an exhilarating solo danced by Christine Winkler. She was spun, hurled and gently passed between two men as they race to keep her off the ground.

The varied program and a new home at the sleek Cobb Energy Centre reflect a new chapter in the ballet's history. After a twang of nostalgia for the Fox Theatre's charm, ballet patrons will rejoice in the decision to relocate.

Says executive director Barry Hughson, "With unparalleled sightlines, no seat farther than 160 feet from the stage and expanded artistic offerings, our patrons' ballet-going experience is going to be better than ever."

Better views and superior acoustics? Yes. Better dancing? Only time will tell.