

“Forever Tango” | Precision set to music

Emotions explode as couples entwine

THEATER REVIEW

By *Moira Macdonald*
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There's a line in “West Side Story” that came to mind while watching “Forever Tango,” now playing at the 5th Avenue. “You saw how they dance,” says Anita, speaking of the men of a neighborhood gang, the Sharks. “Like they got to get rid of something quick.”

The dancers in this soulful, sexy tango show prowl the stage, whipping their legs in and out and around at lightning speed, falling into sudden lunges on soft knees, exploding into a back bend so violent it seems that the dancer's neck should snap. It's as if, as Anita says, they're trying to cast something away; dancing with a barely contained fury.

Created by Luis Bravo, the show debuted in San Francisco in 1994 and has since enjoyed Broadway success (twice) and extensive international touring. Last in Seattle in 1997 at the Moore, it's now settled comfortably into the 5th Avenue for a handful of performances, and those intrigued by the infinite variation of the tango should scurry to get tickets.

“Forever Tango” is a jewel box of a show; even in a large theater, it feels intimate, with a dim stage sparkling with starlike lights. An 11-piece orchestra sits upstage, while the slinky dancers own the downstage region.

Individually, they are six men, all impossibly suave in their suits, fedoras, and graceful slouch; and six women, stretched to infinity on their high heels, all seeming perfectly capable of kicking flies off the ceiling. But truly, they are six couples, with set partners; this is a dance that requires absolute intimacy and trust. Tango dancers perform as one, their torsos rigid and pressed together, their legs swirling and coiling so quickly it seems spontaneous — these limbs have a life of their own.

Each couple brings its own flavor to the tango, often irresistibly. (The show's one weak point is its few unison numbers, where it feels as if each couple is watering down its own style, to blend in.) Melina Brufman and Claudio Gonzalez dance with the fearless athleticism of acrobats, at times flying through the air. Francisco



Francisco Mercado and Natalia Hills move like jungle cats.

“FOREVER TANGO” will play at 7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Friday, 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. Sunday, 5th Avenue Theatre, 1308 Fifth Avenue, Seattle; \$20-\$65, 206-292-ARTS or www.ticketmaster.com.

Mercado and Natalia Hills moved like jungle cats, stalking each other with an almost feral menace. Veronica Gardella and rubber-legged Marcelo Bernadaz are the comic couple, investing their sprightly tangos with a Chaplinesque charm.

All this is backed up by singer Alfredo Saez, an appealing performer who on opening night seemed inadequately miked, and the marvelous orchestra. Bravo's lighting design and Argemira Alfonso's darkly frothy costumes add immensely to the mood.

But ultimately, “Forever Tango” is about the way a gloved hand floats to a partner's shoulder, or a pair of legs suddenly slices into a scissor kick, or a head tilts back as if in rapture. The tango is a mysteriously beautiful dance, filled with infinite detail and fragrant of stories whispered in a crowded dance hall. Here, it receives an elegant and worthy showcase.

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