



Spellbound Contemporary Dance From Rome

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The North American debut of Rome's Spellbound Contemporary Dance at Annenberg Center Thursday evening was Dance Celebration's 30th anniversary gift to its loyal audiences. Aside from troupes like Grupo Corpo Brazilian Dance Theater, a Dance Celebration favorite, few companies can afford to maintain dancers of this caliber. Artistic director Mauro Astolfi manages to keep nine well-matched dancers of such chameleon-like suppleness, they were not only spellbinding, but breathtaking.

With much similarity in tone, lighting and tempo to a work Astolfi mounted on BalletX last week, the Annenberg show began and ended with *Lost for Words*. That is, the work was broken into two sections. One, which was created in 2011 and the second in 2012. They acted as prelude and postlude to 2009's *Downshifting*.

The three Astolfi works I've now seen are characterized by chiaroscuro-style lighting -- the dancers work in and out of shadow -- almost in optical illusion, and an aggressive confrontational style that is body-twisting and mind-bending. As difficult as it is to apprehend any of these works' arc, it is equally pleasurable to watch his company perform them.

Alessandra Chirulli set a high mark with her opening solo and was matched by other startling leg and torso work by Sofia Barbiero and Marianna Ombrosi whose hip joints seem to allow for 360-degree movement. In turn, the men, Michelangelo Puglisi, Giacomo Todeschi and Mario Latzera, equal them.

Lost for Words sets out to deal with empty promises, and it's most literal phrase has Puglisi and Todeschi pulling Gaia Mattioli along by her arms as if to break them while another dancer places a hand over her eyes.

In *Downshifting*, a bluesy section has Puglisi, Mattioli and another male turn away from us and slowly melt into deep plié, resting there for a moment. In a duet, Puglisi rejects Mattioli who turns immediately to the arms of another man. In the final moments, Mattioli throws imploring arms around Puglisi's neck but he drags her along backwards -- cruelly, without touching her. If this company comes again with more varied material, it too could become a Dance Celebration mainstay.