Springing to life, KC Ballet program delights
REVIEW by Lisa Jo Sagolla, Kansas City Star, May 7, 2010
Referenced work: A Solo in Nine Parts performed by Kansas City Ballet

A healthy balance of the spanking new and the tried and true brightened the stage of the Lyric Theatre on Thursday when Kansas City Ballet gave the opening performance of its spring program.

The evening kicked off with the world premiere of an entrancing ensemble piece by Toni Pimble, followed by the “Donizetti Pas de Deux,” choreographed in 1967 by the company’s artistic director emeritus, Todd Bolender.

The program continued with the world premiere of an invigorating Jessica Lang work and closed with an abbreviated version of George Balanchine’s popular 1970 suite “Who Cares?,” a assemblage of jazzy ballet dances set to George Gershwin standards.

The troupe gave appropriately lush interpretation to Pimble’s “Concerto Grosso,” set to a dancey Ernest Bloch score for stringed orchestra. Undeniably lovely, and ebulliently launched by Charles Martin in a solo full of explosive jumps, the ballet employed an over-use of expansive arm movements to conjure its aura of dreamy romanticism.

A technically challenging classical duet, choreographed to themes from Gaetano Donizetti’s tragic opera “La Favorita,” Bolender’s ballet was the low point of the evening. The showpiece’s durable choreography was compromised by Aisling Hill-Connor’s shaky performance and the lumbering presence of Luke Luzicka. Although a frequently featured member of the company’s male contingent and a sturdy partner, Luzicka is a performer whose talents and appeal have always eluded this critic.

In Lang’s “A Solo in Nine Parts,” set to mirthful Antonio Vivaldi music, the choreographer melded playful gestures, unbridled movement energies and strong ballet legwork into a hybrid vocabulary of the contemporary ilk that this company, under the artistic direction of William Whitener, does so well.

Lang engineered spirited interplay among nine dancers to create the feel of simple folksy pleasures, aided immeasurably by designer Lisa Choles, whose adorably ragtag costumes underlined the work’s down-home sensibilities.

Lang has established a reputation for concocting ingenious choreographic interactions between dancing bodies and the movements of striking set and costume pieces. With this new work she showed she is equally adept at engineering intricate interplay with just nine dancers on a bare stage.

“Who Cares?” has been described as Balanchine’s balletic take on musical comedy dancing of the 1920s. Watching it recalled the delights of taking in a good old-fashioned Broadway musical. Kimberly Cowen wowed and charmed with a spot-on performance of the ballet’s tricky “Fascinatin’ Rhythm” solo.

Though all the women displayed polished technique and oodles of personality, the stand-out performer was Michael Eaton, in the ballet’s only solo male role. His gorgeous elegance evoked the air of urban sophistication that this wittily entertaining work demands.