

# The Washington Post

## ‘The Sun Also Rises’: Washington Ballet’s graceful, gritty voyage to Hemingway’s world

By Sarah Kaufman, May 10, 2013

**Before the curtain rises on the Washington Ballet’s “Hemingway: The Sun Also Rises,” you get a taste of the ruin, decay and vague comfort that the war-scarred writer etched into his book. This atmosphere is evoked in Billy Novick’s gorgeous piano overture, which guides the audience through deep, slow waters into a Hemingwayish world.**

Hemingwayishness, as we soon discover, is the language of this ballet. If the book’s characters and plot are sketchily rendered on the Eisenhower Theater stage, the immersion into a fantasized 1920s Paris and Spain is full, enthusiastic and great fun.

Hemingway’s lean, economical writing style doesn’t have much of an echo here, though by Washington Ballet standards, the production that premiered Thursday at the Kennedy Center is surprisingly restrained. Even with its shimmering Chandelier Lady (Aurora Dickie, ice water flowing in her veins), who was borne over the heads of several men wearing an enormous confection of crystals on her head. And even with the Cancan Girls, who hollered like wildcats and kicked with such vigor that one of them busted a garte

Yes, you could consider this ballet restrained even with the giant bobbing puppets that signal Spain’s Festival of San Fermin, where the bulls ran by via video, with drums rumbling in the orchestra pit.

Where is the restraint amid all these bells and whistles, you ask? It’s in Artistic Director Septime Webre’s pacing, which is less hurried than in his “Great Gatsby” of 2010. And it’s in much of his choreography, particularly in the solos for Jared Nelson as Jake, the disfigured veteran who takes us from his typewriter to Parisian bars and Spanish bullfights as he seeks a way to live with postwar despair. **Nelson’s understated poignancy, a sense of being wrapped up in psychic bandages that only come off when he is alone, is one of the pearls of this ballet.**

**Another is Novick’s music, his arrangements and original compositions, which are performed live by his band and local musicians. Novick also collaborated with Webre on “The Great Gatsby,” but here his velvety jazz is even more artfully woven into an emotional landscape. This ballet gives us ample time to enjoy it.**

With a few more sunrises for editing and rehearsals, “The Sun Also Rises” could be quite a smashing production. As it stands now it’s lively and entertaining, if flawed. Show-stopping guests help power it along: Chanteuse E. Faye Butler in Folies Bergere finery, growling lecherously to poor impotent Jake about sausages and lollipops in “You Gotta Give Me Some,” NPR journalist Ari Shapiro crooning in French and flamenco dancer Edwin Aparicio, with his own trio of musicians, working up authentic heat. Yet a few bumps trip up the tumble and rush of the evening. In this many-layered enterprise, some of the layers work better than others.

With everything Webre had to direct — projections, set changes, dancers shoving beds, bars, tables and chairs on and off the stage — his choreography is occasionally undercooked. A human carousel with

dancers bobbing up and down didn't gel on opening night. Ensemble numbers in the bar scenes, with dancers jumping on and off the furniture, were sometimes cumbersome. Pirouettes were never in short supply — in a boxing ring, on the battlefield — though at times you wished they were.

In the Parisian half of the ballet, with its sophisticated black, white and gray tones, Helen Q. Huang's costumes strikes the right chords of urbane wit. But in the brightly colored Spanish section, campiness takes over. As Lady Brett Ashley, Sona Kharatian appears in a gumdrop-green flapper dress that screams St. Patrick's Day. Brooklyn Mack's red velveteen bullfighter sports hot-pink hose. And as Jake's war buddy Bill Gorton, Jonathan Jordan wears a bow tie, orange plaid knickers and lime-green socks, looking louder than David Hockney in the 1970s. Making a bit much of the between-the-lines suspicion that Gorton is gay, no?

Occasional projections of silent movies competed with the dancing, though it was helpful — and often, deliberately witty — to see snatches of Hemingway's prose appear over the dancers' heads.

Hugh Landwehr's props and sets — panels of newsprint and photos of key landmarks — lend just the right sepia-tinged romance while also freeing up the stage for dancing. Clifton Taylor's lighting helps telescope the mood from boisterous barhopping to intimate rumination.

The single best-staged moment is in the second half of the ballet, and there's not a turn, leap or complicated lift in it. It's a fistfight with a violent edge that engulfs all the men (and some of the women). You fear for them; you feel their rage and frustration. More than any of the dancing, this scene conveys some of the hopeless desolation that Hemingway felt so deeply.

*The Washington Ballet performs "Hemingway: The Sun Also Rises" Saturday and Sunday at 1:30 and 7:30 p.m. in the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater.*