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## **Forsythe's troupe gets real in its last local appearance**

- Janice Berman, Special to The Chronicle  
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Fifteen years is a long time in the life of a premier choreographer, and that's how long it has been since William Forsythe last toured his own Ballett Frankfurt to the greater (i.e. beyond New York City) United States. The company returned Thursday night to Zellerbach Hall for a tantalizingly brief three-night stint at Cal Performances.

Founded in 1984, the company will disband in August, the result of a withdrawal of government funding. In its place will be a new troupe, the Forsythe Company, to be based in Frankfurt and Dresden and funded with a mix of corporate and government support. Tonight is the last chance for Bay Area audiences to see the company that made Forsythe famous and vice versa.

Forsythe's knack for picking exciting dancers is still there, as is his collaboration with the Dutch composer Thom Willems. But there are changes, and they're wonderful to behold.

Forsythe, who was born in New York, danced with the Joffrey Ballet and moved to Germany in 1973, has widened his scope of investigation and his palette of movement, often to ravishing effect. Today he seems willing to consider that pointe shoes need not be used as stilettos to make an impact. Instead of knifelike rigor, his dancers' feet often look downright rubbery, squooshing this way and that on toe, setting up further surprises in the body and in the dance.

Forsythe's ballets today appear less ballerina-centric than his earlier work. His dancers move and look more like real women and real men, in a variety of sizes and shapes, with actions and reactions that are physical and also behavioral. This widening embrace of normalcy (or what passes for it onstage) results in dances that -- though still risk-taking -- feel more natural and more sublime than their flashy predecessors.

Four pieces, created between 1996 and 2002, are on the program. "The Room as It Was" is the dance with the squooshiest feet, one pair of which belong to Forsythe's wife, Dana Caspersen, in red hot pants. She also wrote the poetic program notes, which say the dance takes place "in a bell of space." This bell is constantly ringing with changes, as when a dancer drops suddenly from an amble to lying flat on her back, or when arms that have just been along for the ride begin lashing straight out from the shoulder, or when a dancer extends his hand to gently touch a female dancer on her collarbone, and her leg unfolds into a developpe.

There's Willems' music, but there isn't really. What you hear is the dancers' breathing, so moving in its exertion. The other fine dancers were Francesca Caroti, Jill Johnson, Jone San Martin, Stephen Galloway, Fabrice Mazliah, Richard Siegal and Ander Zabala; most of the troupe is from the United States. "Duo," danced by Johnson and Natalie Thomas in soft slippers and sheer-topped black leotards, was a work of stunning physicality, lit by dimmed house lights. Johnson displayed an amplitude reminiscent of Suzanne Farrell's; Thomas appeared more athletic, executing frisky soccer kicks. Willems' music was lushly romantic and elusive.

The dance titled "N.N.N.N." described a pose by the four men as they reached their arms to touch each others' heads, one of a melange of moves whose awkwardness and intimacy constituted a sensitive observation of men in groups. The dancers were Cyril Baldy, Amancio Gonzalez, Georg

Reischl and Zabala.

Polar exploration inspired "One Flat Thing, Reproduced," for 14 dancers below, on and around 20 large tables, instead of ice floes. The dance was stunningly athletic, but (appropriately) lacked the warmth of the other works. In all, regrettably, it felt like a rumble in the cafeteria.

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Ballett Frankfurt: 8 tonight in Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley. Tickets: \$38-\$64. Call 510-642-9988. [www.calperfs.berkeley.edu](http://www.calperfs.berkeley.edu).

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Dana Caspersen, left, struts in red hot pants; Ander Zabala and Jone San Martin bend and sway in "The Room as It Was." Chronicle photo by Mark Costantini



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Ballett Frankfurt dancers (from left) Jone San Martin, Dana Caspersen and Ander Zabala. Chronicle photo by Mark Costantini



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