

REVIEW

Sarasota Ballet revives classic ‘Giselle’ with emotional punch

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For many a ballet traditionalist, it isn’t a holiday season without “The Nutcracker.” Over the 123 years since it debuted, the Christmas classic has introduced the art form to generations of future patrons, bolstered countless company bank accounts and provided elevators, department stores and radio stations with a familiar seasonal soundscape.

So more than a few eyebrows were raised when Sarasota Ballet Director Iain Webb – a Brit who doesn’t share the American reverence for that time-honored staple – instead programed the darkly melancholic “Giselle” for the company’s December offering, at a time when a global pandemic has already fueled an overload of emotional angst.

The story of a young girl who takes her own life after discovering the man she has fallen in love with is pledged to another, then returns in death to save him from vengeful spirits, is everything the “Nutcracker” is not. Madness, betrayal, suicide and remorse – no cloying sugar plum sweetness here.

But I would wager any skeptics in the audience were converted by the company’s faithful and haunting rendition of the most famous ballet of the Romantic era at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall Friday night. From the sumptuous sets and costumes (purchased from the Birmingham Royal Ballet for the ballet’s last staging in 2019), to the full-bodied interpretation of the Adolphe Adam score by the Sarasota Orchestra (led by Jared Oaks, musical director at Ballet West) to the moody, evocative lighting (by Aaron Muhl), this was a performance richer with history, tradition and emotional punch than any “Nutcracker” could have delivered.

And that’s before we even consider the dancing – which, despite some nervous energy that lead to unsteadiness and a few missed marks on opening night, was committed, convincing and, in one case, transcendent.

Victoria Hulland brought a mastery to the lead that surpassed her colleagues and even her own previous interpretations. The 12 years that have



A scene from The Sarasota Ballet’s production of Peter Wright’s “Giselle.”
PHOTOS BY FRANK ATURA/THE SARASOTA BALLET



Victoria Hulland and Ricardo Rhodes in a scene from Peter Wright’s “Giselle” presented by The Sarasota Ballet.

passed since she first danced “Giselle” in the company’s 2009 premiere of Sir Peter Wright’s production have only enhanced her skill in capturing a role that veers from the besotted love of a naïve young peasant girl to the madness of a woman betrayed to the beneficent forgiveness of an angel. Indeed, so vulnerable, nuanced and genuine was her performance it was hard to look at anyone

else when she was on stage.

Likewise, as Count Albrecht – who disguises himself as a peasant to win Giselle’s heart and inadvertently causes her madness when his true identity and previous commitment to Bathilde (a deliciously dismissive Lauren Ostrander in a non-dancing role) is revealed – Ricardo Rhodes exhibited an unprecedented skill and authenticity. In earlier

years, his perfect ballet body and captivating good looks sometimes eclipsed his technique, but like Hulland (who was also one of Webb’s first recruits after his arrival 15 years ago) his maturity and confidence produced an exceptionally moving performance. And would that every ballerina had as attentive a partner; I have rarely seen overhead lifts performed so gently and effortlessly.

Though not as memorable, the remainder of the cast, right down to the synchronous corps of Willis (the spirits of jilted brides) in Act II, was well rehearsed and credible. In her first outing as Myrtha, Queen of the Willis, Janae Korte was initially clearly nervous – and who wouldn’t be with that interminably long arabesque promenade and penchee as an opener? – but steadily gained fluidity. Her one-dimensional facial expression captured the queen’s severity if not her sense of superiority, but I’d wager that artistic nuance will soon come to this promising dancer. As for Ricki Bertoni – who as Giselle’s rejected admirer, Hilarion, is danced to death by the Willis – perhaps I’ve seen him in too many comical character roles of late to find the pathos in this performance.

Though I’m beginning to sound like a stuck record on this one, Marijana Dominis once again stood out, this time in the pas de six and as Mayna, one of Myrtha’s acolytes. And I envied those who would see Ostrander in a role more suited to her commanding talents when she would return as Myrtha in the second cast Saturday matinee.

Even the vintage miming (not always convincingly conveyed by today’s dancers) and the deaths (the bane of my enjoyment of story ballets because they often lack credibility) were gracefully organic, contributing to making a plot line less familiar and more convoluted than that of “The Nutcracker” refreshingly clear.

While audience members may not have departed with sugar plums dancing in their heads, they left with something more rare and precious: a faithfully rendered presentation of another kind of ballet classic, one that insists love can surpass even the bounds of mortality. In these troubling times, that’s a welcome message too.

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