

A New Romeo and Juliet

Pointe Magazine

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Edwaard Liang is one of the ballet world's choreographers du jour. His work appears in the repertoires of The Joffrey Ballet, Kirov Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet, among other top companies. But until now, the former New York City Ballet dancer has only created short abstract contemporary pieces. He'll test his classical full-length mettle next month with a brand new *Romeo and Juliet* for Tulsa Ballet. We checked in with him to see how rehearsals are going.

How is creating a full-length uniquely challenging?

My ballets always have stories, but most of the time it's just in my mind—I don't really tell the audience, they can find their own way. In this realm, everyone knows the story, but I still have to tell it, and do so in a seamless way without skipping anything. The magic is that Prokofiev's score tells everything. All I have to do is follow his genius.

What went through your head when Tulsa Ballet director Marcello Angelini first approached you about this project?

It's a big risk for a director to ask a contemporary choreographer to do a pure, classical *Romeo and Juliet*. In the beginning, I think he had more belief in me than I had in myself. But once I got in the studio I just relied on really characterizing the dancers, making sure I told story and listened to the music. I wouldn't say it's easy, but it's fun and fantastic.

How did it feel to work with the classical vocabulary?

It made me grow. These are the steps I trained in and grew up with. It was fun to create the variations, the group dances, the village dances—they're so different from what I'm used to.

What about the sword fight scenes?

I choreographed those together with master sword fighter Steve White. I trained with him in New York for six months off and on beforehand to learn the basics so that I could understand it with my body. In Tulsa, I gave the trafficking, he built in the fight choreography, then I tweaked that and came up with steps.

In your opinion, what makes *Romeo and Juliet* so suited to ballet?

You're not having to fall in love with a swan queen who's half bird, half human, you're not a weird peasant who turns into a ghost. It's clearly about humanity—human emotions and relationships. It's a universal love story.

Tulsa Ballet performs Liang's *Romeo and Juliet* February 10–12 at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center. For more info and tickets, visit tulsaballet.org.