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Tulsa Ballet's 'Dracula' soars

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Tulsa Ballet is still down with the Count.

The company has brought Ben Stevenson's "Dracula" back to life for the Halloween season, and the production that opened Friday at the Tulsa PAC is as ghoulishly entertaining as ever.

Stevenson created the ballet in 1997 for Houston Ballet, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Bram Stoker's original novel, which introduced the concept of the vampire into popular culture.

In creating the work, Stevenson made no attempt to duplicate Stoker's story on stage. Instead, he built the ballet's action around a few basic elements of the novel - two women who come under Dracula's spell, a crumbling castle full of wraith-like "brides," the madman Renfield, the climactic battle.

Stevenson's "Dracula" also presents its title character in the proper way - as a monster, instead of some romantic figure. There is a definite alien quality to the choreography for Dracula that give the impression of his being not quite human - slithery slides, forceful kicks, partnering that shifts the emphasis to the man, rather than the woman.

Stevenson's choices go against every convention of the romantic lead in a story ballet to create a most effective aura of unease around the title character. And Tulsa Ballet principal dancer Alfonso Martin, in his last season with the company, pretty much attacks this role with all the devilishness one could want.

Martin invests each step with an animalistic energy - Dracula has one thing on his mind, and his every move is focused in that direction. Even when he's standing still, Martin is able to command attention so that one can believe, until the final minutes, that Dracula controls the action with unearthly power.

Most story ballets open with some kind of village scene - Stevenson's "Dracula" saves it for the second act, and in Tulsa Ballet's production, it served as an introduction to two of the company's newest members, senior soloists Madalina Stoica and Ovidiu Iancu, as the story's romantic pair of Svetlana and Frederick.

Both recently joined the company from the Bucharest National Opera, the repertoire of which is almost entirely classical ballet. And the village scene is perhaps the most conventionally classical portion of "Dracula," though Stevenson's vocabulary of movement tweaks the conventions in subtle and tricky ways.

Stoica, in some ways, reminds of former Tulsa Ballet principal dancer Irina Ushakova - she has that same fluid way of moving, so that every step, every gesture is part of a continuous flow of movement, yet underneath is a tungsten-like strength. Her pointe work was impeccable and she portrayed Svetlana's shyness, love and fear convincingly.

Iancu was featured in one of the ballets in the company's season opener, but this was the first opportunity to see him go full out, and he is impressive. Stevenson's stylized choreography seemed to come to him naturally, as he executed some tantalizingly risky lifts and leaps with aplomb.

The couple's performance of the pas de deux was one of the highlights of the evening, as they embodied the dance's emotional arc from the playful to the passionate to quietly tender.

Principal dancer Sofia Menteguiaga was an excellent Flora, Dracula's first conquest who becomes the leader of his minions. She brought real fire to the part, whether confronting the villagers or soaring through the air (of all the dancers who "flew" during the evening, Menteguiaga seemed the most at ease above the stage).

As Renfield, Shu Kinouchi just about stole the show with his high-speed antics, topped off with a vigorous virtuoso solo in Act Three that had Kinouchi tearing around stage in demonic glee.

If there were problems with "Dracula," they came in the ensemble dances, particularly in Act Two, where the men's dance was no where near as tight and composed as it should have been.

Peter Stafford Wilson, in his first appearance as the ballet's principal conductor, led the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra in an appropriately fervid performance of the score, arranged from music by Franz Liszt by John Lanchbery, and which featured some impressive playing by pianist Yee Sik Wong and percussionists Steve Craft, Roy Smith and Jeff Lawless.

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Associated Images:



Alfonso Martin, in his last season with the Tulsa Ballet, pretty much attacks the title role in "Dracula" with all the devilishness one could want. CORY YOUNG / Tulsa World

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