

Tulsa Ballet brings famed 'Lady of the Camellias' back after 10 years

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By James D. Watts, Jr.

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It's been a decade since Tulsa Ballet last presented "Lady of the Camellias," the Val Caniparoli ballet based on the classic story of tragic romance.

The company first presented this work, from the novel that also inspired the opera "La Traviata" and the Greta Garbo film "Camille," in 2000.

Two years later, Tulsa Ballet earned an invitation - the only one issued to a U.S. dance company - to perform at the Sintra Festival, a summerlong celebration of the performing arts in Sintra, Portugal.

It was Tulsa Ballet's international debut, and it came about largely on the strength of the video of the company's performance of "Lady of the Camellias."

"We were the only performers in the entire festival who were given two weekends of performances," said Marcello Angelini, the company's artistic director. "We did a mixed-bill program the first weekend, and 'Lady of the Camellias' the second."

Those three performances of "Lady of the Camellias" in Portugal played to capacity crowds - the only dance performances of the 2002 festival to sell out.

"And it was because of 'Lady' that we had European critics calling Tulsa Ballet 'one of the best dance companies in the world,'" Angelini said. "In a very real sense, this ballet elevated this company to a new level."

But after a celebratory encore to open the company's season in the fall of 2002, "Lady of the Camellias" faded from the company's repertoire.

"What is unique about 'Lady' is that you have to have exactly the right cast to do it properly," Angelini said. "Every character has to be strong."

That is especially true of the ballet's main character - the courtesan Marguerite, whose beauty captivates men from all strata of society.

"She has this effervescent facade, but you sense underneath that there is a darker, sadder side," Angelini said. "Marguerite has to portray this huge span of emotion. She is this very worldly adult woman, who suddenly experiences real, true love for the first time. You have to see that transformation of her falling in love, and the tragedy that comes from that.

"And we need an Armand who can portray all the passion and ardor of a young man in love and still be an incredible partner, because this is one brutally difficult ballet," he said. "It's one of those ballets in which there is no place for anyone to hide.

"The pas de deux in this ballet is one of the most difficult in the repertoire," Angelini said.

"Our two newest dancers came to us from the Universal Ballet in Korea, where they had recently danced John Cranko's 'Eugene Onegin,' which has a reputation for its difficulty. And they said the pas de deux in 'Onegin' was a walk in the park compared to the one in 'Lady.' "

Only three dancers who were part of the 2002 performances - principal dancer Alfonso Martin, senior soloist Alexandra Bergman and guest artist Megan McKown - are in this year's cast.

Martin, who is retiring from performing at the end of this season, danced the role of Armand in 2002; for this production, he will dance the role of the Baron, Armand's principal rival for Marguerite's affections. Bergman, who will also retire at the end of this year, will be dancing the same role she performed before: Olympe. Miller has the character role of Prudence.

Principal dancer Sofia Menteguiga and senior soloist Ovidu Iancu and newcomers Son You-Hee and Rhee Hyon-jun, formerly leading dancers with South Korea's Universal Ballet, will dance the roles of Marguerite and Armand.

"It took us a decade to put together a company that could do this ballet," Angelini said. "We've had a lot of very, very good dancers over the years, but it's only now that we have all the pieces we need in place for this ballet.

"And it may be another decade until we can get another group that will make this ballet fly."



Tulsa Ballet's Alexandra Bergman and Ovidiu Iancu perform in "Lady of the Camellias." STEPHEN PINGRY / Tulsa World