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Tulsa Ballet premieres are exhilarating, complex

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Normally, to see a ballet created by choreographer Wayne McGregor, one would have to travel to the world's major cities: London, Paris, New York, San Francisco, Moscow.

McGregor allows only the most elite companies in the world to perform his unique, groundbreaking, mind-and-body-expanding choreography.

Ordinarily, if one wanted to see Edwaard Liang's "Age of Innocence," one would have to attend a performance of Chicago's Joffrey Ballet, for whom the work was created and which has performed it exclusively for years.

Until this past weekend, that is, when Tulsa Ballet gave the U.S. premiere of McGregor's "PreSentient" and the Oklahoma premiere of Liang's "Age of Innocence" as part of the company's first production of the season.

These two ballets on the surface could not be more unlike, yet share some fundamental qualities. Each was crafted by a dance maker who freights every movement - no matter how seemingly insignificant - with profound meaning and purpose, so that the finished work has a humanity and an emotional impact that is exhilarating to experience.

McGregor's "PreSentient" is a work of almost perpetual motion, set to Steve Reich's Triple Quartet - short, percussive shards of melody that are continually repeating, rearranging, recombining.

The choreography works in much the same way. It requires extreme degrees of speed and flexibility from the dancers, as phrases of almost random movement coalesce into precise, unified patterns before spinning out again into wild, aleatory strings.

It is familiar and alien all at once - almost like observing life at a microscopic level, with all its intense, frantic yet purposeful activity.

"PreSentient" is not quite like anything Tulsa Ballet has done before, but the company performed with remarkable assurance. The duet by Diana Gomez and new dancer Jiyan Dai was a marvel of physicality, as the two dancers bent and twisted each other in ways that at times did not seem humanly possible.

Dai also was very good in a bravura solo, in which a single, solitary classical combination looked so out of place as to be jarring - another way of showing the organic roots of this choreography. Another newcomer, Chelsea Keefer, recently promoted from Tulsa Ballet II, had moments where her relative inexperience showed through, but otherwise acquitted herself quite well.

The underlying inspiration for "Age of Innocence" is Liang's love of Jane Austen's novels. There is no real narrative to this work, but each section unfolds with the dramatic logic of a self-contained story.

It opens with an ensemble piece that mirrors the sort of dances that were a centerpiece of Austen's novels - men and women lined up on either side of a room, coming together and moving apart in a kind geometry of romance. A male quartet, performed by Rodrigo Hermesmeier, Shu Kinouchi, Takashi Okita and Jose Antonio Checa Romero, was a stylized show of masculinity - a pair of matching duels, so to speak, with two of the dancers emerging triumphant.

The duet between principal dancer Alfonso Martin and Keefer was an intriguing mix of the conventionally romantic with the subtle yet strikingly violent - those moments when Martin literally bent Keefer around his

body, underscoring the male's dominance.

The second pas de deux, with principal dancer Sofia Menteguiaga and new senior soloist Ovidiu Iancu, was more powerfully romantic because it was very much a highly charged give-and-take, as pursuer and pursued, passion and resistance, kept shifting between the two. Then, right as this duet reached a moment of crisis, suddenly a quartet of couples burst onto the stage, interrupting this passionate conversation, postponing the ultimate, exquisite conclusion.

In between these works was Jorma Elo's "Slice to Sharp," which the company first performed last season. It served as a perfect bridge between the works of McGregor and Liang.

Elo's angular choreography is technically demanding and swiftly paced, if emotionally inert - it is dance designed to be visually stunning (which it was), maybe even a bit humorous, but little more. After McGregor's work, "Slice to Sharp" looked terribly contrived, and its lack of real emotional content only heightened the power of Liang's ballet.

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Associated Images:

Tulsa Ballet's Sofia Menteguiaga and Ovidiu Iancu in a scene from Edwaard Liang's "Age of Innocence."
Courtesy