

Tulsa Ballet top-notch in 'Midsummer Night's Dream'

The dance production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" succeeds on all levels

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It's been nearly a decade since Tulsa Ballet last performed Christopher Wheeldon's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

In a way, that's unfortunate, because this ballet version of Shakespeare's romantic comedy is one of the most effective and satisfying story ballets of modern times. On the other hand, there is that old warning about having too much of a good thing. Wheeldon's ballet is certainly that, because it succeeds on all levels. It tells a coherent story with characters who are believable even if they're otherworldly creatures. It is a challenging work of dance, fusing strict classical style with contemporary energy and expressiveness.

And, maybe most importantly, it's genuinely quite funny.

Granted, Wheeldon had some excellent source material with which to work. But I've seen enough botched adaptations of Shakespeare in all sorts of situations to know it takes a lot of talent and effort to do justice to the Bard's works.

Tulsa Ballet certainly has the talent and the work ethic necessary to do this ballet, as it showed at Friday's opening night performance at the Tulsa PAC.

From the opening prologue, which showed what fools the four mortals in this story could be, to the stately serene pas de deux that brings it all to a "happily ever after" conclusion, the Tulsa Ballet dancers put on an impressive show.

Principal dancers Youhee Son and Hyonjun Rhee had the right regal air as Titania and Oberon. Rhee especially was a commanding presence - one could almost believe he was actually controlling all that went on around him. His dancing was powerful and fluid, seemingly effortless in solos and his duets with Son.

As the four mortals whose romantic entanglements create much of the story's comedy, the quartet of Madalina Stoica, Jennifer Grace, Jonnathan Ramirez Mejia and Ovidiu Iancu was nothing short of superb.

The choreography for these characters has a decided rougher edge to it - there is a sense of grace in the movement, but it's more muscular, more earth-bound.

And these four embrace it with gusto.

The duet between Iancu and Stoica, as one tries to fend off the amorous advances of the other, is acrobatic, risky and almost brutally physical. It's also absolutely hilarious.

Grace, a member of Tulsa Ballet II, more than holds her own in this company, dancing with an easy self-confidence that matches her character's attitude - at least, that is, until the man she loves suddenly is besotted with another woman. Stoica brings a great sense of comedy and physical daring to her role of Helena, a woman who doesn't seem to have any luck in love - and then suddenly finds herself with more passionate suitors than she ever counted on.

This leads to the quartet's "battle scene," full of chases, sword-fights and face-slapping, and it's the comic highlight of the evening - although the antics of Dallas Blagg as the bumpkin-turned-burro Bottom and Rodrigo Hermesmeyer as the benignly devilish Puck earned their share of laughs.

Music director Peter Stafford Wilson conducted the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra, which gave a performance of the score - compiled from the music of Mendelssohn - full of effervescence and vitality.

Wilson's pacing was excellent, and he guided the players in phrasing that perfectly underscored the action and emotion of the scene.

The only musical flaw was a less-than-perfect performance by the off-stage chorus and soloists, prepared by Casey Cantwell.



Jennifer Grace as Titania and Andrew Silks as Bottom perform in a scene from Tulsa Ballet's production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." MICHAEL WYKE / Tulsa World