



Flash Review 1, 5-4: The Dancers' Burden Carrying Tomasson's Romeo & Juliet at S.F. Ballet

By Aimée Ts'ao
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San Francisco Ballet's "Romeo and Juliet" is proof that good dancers don't necessarily make good choreographers. Despite the best intentions and the desire to delve deeply into Shakespeare's timeless tragedy, Helgi Tomasson's efforts are for naught. Mediocre productions can be tolerated when they serve as vehicles for stellar artists who are given the opportunity to deliver sublime performances of what they do best. The only resemblance this "Romeo and Juliet" has to any mode of transportation is to a sledge, which is dragged over rough terrain by the courageous dancers. What would have happened had they been given choreography that catalyzes the story rather than hinders it?

Tomasson's greatest sin is in his "misuse" of the music. While Prokofiev's score is not quite as sacred as the text of Shakespeare, it has its own structure of motifs. For example, it simply does not work to have Romeo begin dancing a solo in the middle of Juliet's music. His next greatest error is making the crowd scenes so chaotic that they detract from the focal point of the scene. I won't go into detail about all the faults in this production as there are a great many, and I prefer to concentrate on the dancing.

When I saw "Romeo and Juliet" premiere in March 1994, Joanna Berman danced with so unmemorable a partner I can't recall his name and whose deadwood performance made her seem glorious by comparison. As seen in the opening night at the War Memorial Opera House this time around, last Friday, paired with Yuri Possokhov, she seems to have faded a bit. His ardent spontaneity and youthful abandon almost make her seem calculated instead of surrendering to her emotions. Christopher Stowell is excellent as Mercutio, both technically and interpretively, while Gonzalo Garcia's Benvolio is exuberant. Damian Smith, as Tybalt, seems high-strung rather than deliberately vicious. By last night, the corps de ballet had finally settled in enough to give the crowd scenes energy and the fight scenes weight and attack.

Wednesday night's cast, with Lorena Feijoo and Roman Rykine in the lead roles, provided a pleasant surprise. The Cuban-trained Feijoo is a strong technician, with a light, high jump and pointe work that ranges from crisp to melting legato. While at times she danced with fluid abandon, her overacting alienated potential sympathizers. Rykine

possesses an exquisite technique, and until this season, had failed to excite me due to his lack of stage personality. I am happy to report that he is beginning to emerge as an expressive dancer and offered a very promising interpretation of Romeo. At his first entrance he was hardly noticeable, largely upstaged by Mercutio and Benvolio (Stowell and Sergio Torrado, respectively) and appeared as an awkward adolescent. Slowly he comes into his own and his initial meeting with Juliet is the galvanizing moment when he finds himself.

Leaving the theater I ran into a dancer who informed me that Rykine and Feijoo are currently an item offstage. Perhaps that explains his newfound artistry in this role. Unless you want to see a particular dancer, you are not missing much by not going to this run. Possokhov and Berman dance again on the Sunday matinee, Rykine and Feijoo repeat their roles Friday night, Stephen Legate and Kristin Long perform Thursday evening and Pierre-Francois Vilanoba and Yuan Yuan Tan repeat Saturday.

(Editor's Note: For more on Tomasson, see Flash Review 2, 5-4: Tears for Ballet.)