



**Flash Review 1, 3-18: Don Q, Wrong Hue
New SF Ballet "Don Quixote" Misses Mark**

By Aimée Ts'ao

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SAN FRANCISCO -- I wish I could say that my dark mood in anticipation of war with Iraq was dispelled by the premiere performance of "Don Quixote" by the San Francisco Ballet this past Friday night at the War Memorial Opera House. Dance has always provided me a means of escape from harsh reality so that later I could return to the world a little better able to cope. But this production, though with many bright, even dazzling, moments from individual dancers, is not the transformative shot in the arm I needed.

The history of the ballet "Don Quixote," specifically the Petipa/Gorsky version, is long and something of a stew that many cooks have tampered with. Now we are served up with the latest staging, including additional choreography, by Helgi Tomasson and Yuri Possokhov, artistic director and principal dancer, respectively, and both choreographers in their own right. This ballet based on a section of the novel by Miguel de Cervantes had been set by numerous choreographers prior to Marius Petipa's version in 1869, which he revised in 1871. Alexander Gorsky created his own version, based on Petipa's, in 1900 and likewise revised it two years later in 1902. The Russians continued to create new versions based on the Petipa and/or Gorsky ones. Although the grande pas de deux from the last act had been danced ad nauseam outside the Soviet Union, it wasn't until 1962 that a complete production was staged in the West by Witold Borkowsky for Ballet Rambert in London. Soon after, in 1966, Rudolph Nureyev created his version based on Petipa and Gorsky for the Vienna State Opera Ballet, which was then revived for the Australian Ballet in 1970, and released on film in 1973. The other version, well-known in America, is Mikhail Baryshnikov's for American Ballet Theatre from 1978.

The Tomasson/Possokhov production suffers from timidity in many realms. The most important aspect of this ballet, regardless of country or ballet company, is that it should be filled with sharp contrasts -- from the high technical demands of the dancing for Kitri and Basilio to the folk dance simplicity of the corps de ballet, from the ribald commedia dell'arte of the plot to the purity of the dream sequence, but all performed with vibrancy and conviction. San Francisco Ballet's attempt misses the mark all to often.

I am not yet disappointed after the curtain rises on the Prologue. Benjamin Pierce as Don Quixote uses his face and hands well in the mime, a very nice surprise, as SFB has generally not shown strength in this area. But Pascal Molat as Sancho Panza absolutely wins me over. He is animated from hairline to toenails, shaping the character as on not-too-smart, yet agreeable rascal. Molat understands both understatement and exaggeration and has perfect comedic timing.

With Act I, in the town square in Barcelona, the troubles begin. Immediately, it is clear that the costumes won't do at all. The corps de ballet is all pastel colors, in perfect rows of ruffles by Jens Jacob Worsaae. Where are the saturated colors, the dramatic lines that the Spanish setting demands? Originally designed for the Royal Danish Ballet in 1983 and on loan from the same, the costumes do nothing to create the atmosphere of hot-blooded Mediterranean people. I had always assumed that I would never be bothered by Worsaae's designs again as he died in 1994, but SF Ballet now has shown his work in its fourth full-evening ballet, the others being "Swan Lake," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Romeo and Juliet."

However, Lorena Feijoo and Joan Boada as Kitri and Basilio quickly make up for the deficiency. Feijoo matches her fiery red costume with her dancing and Boada instantly has the audience in his hands. As Gamache, the effete gentleman suitor, Damian Smith is hilarious. He bustles about constantly and I find myself watching him instead of the insipid corps de ballet, which should be just as engrossed in their own stage business, instead of standing around like a flock of English aristocrats at a tea party. Have I been spoiled by such companies as the Bolshoi Ballet, the National Ballet of Cuba and the Paris Opera Ballet, where everyone on stage is in character and forming a vital backdrop to the main action? There is no reason that SF Ballet couldn't bring itself up to that level with some focussed coaching. The beautiful Julie Diana could put a harder, sexier edge on her Street Dancer, more like a whore in "Romeo and Juliet"; Vanessa Zahorian, as one of Kitri's friends, is positively radiant.

The next major weakness is apparent in Act II. The lighting is so dim that the costumes blend into the background of the same colors and it's hard to see what is happening. Peter Brandenhoff transforms himself so well into the leader of the Gypsies that I don't recognize him for quite some time. Sherri LeBlanc is her usual powerfully emotive self, but is not served well by a bright white, formless peasant blouse, and a long skirt which hides her legs too much. Don Quixote's Dream has enough light to show a regal Muriel Maffre as the Queen of the Driads and a heavenly Elizabeth Miner infusing her Cupid with warmth and humor. Though now still a bit ragged, the corps de ballet will hopefully settle in enough to show the same qualities they have achieved in both "La Bayadere" and "Giselle," perfect unity and effortless grace.

The third act comes to a close with the sizzling pyrotechnics of the grande pas de deux. Boada and Feijoo are both in their element. But it's the fouettes that floor me. Feijoo easily finishes the thirty-two, but she does it by doing two singles and then a double during which she opens her fan, then closes it for the next two

singles. I've never seen anything like it, but I realize that her schooling has prepared her for such virtuosity. (See [my review](#) of the National Ballet of Cuba, where all three ballerinas in "Coppelia," including Feijoo's sister Lorna, do amazing turns.)

There is always hope that all the dancers, not just the main ones mentioned, can pump up their delivery and overcome a rather sedate production. With some real energy and verve, the shortcomings of the set design, costumes and lighting of this "Don Quixote" could be relegated to the inconsequential instead of being noticeable problems.