



Flash Review 2, 6-24: 'Rite' Ballet, Wrong Feeling Joffrey Ballet of Chicago Mummifies Diaghilev

By Aimée Ts'ao

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CUPERTINO, California -- Ten years after the Joffrey Ballet visited the Bay Area for the last time, its successor, the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, flew into the area this past weekend. Unfortunately, it decamped not at the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House, where the Joffrey Ballet used to perform in the "good old days," but at the Flint Center in Cupertino, 45 miles south. I say unfortunately because the last time I saw the Joffrey Ballet at the Opera House, they danced a Diaghilev program of Leonide Massine's "Parade" and Nijinsky's "L'Après-midi d'une Faune" and "Le Sacre du Printemps," with full orchestra. It was glorious. Times changed. Ballet companies no longer tour so frequently and when they do, they don't come as often to San Francisco, as the Opera House is not available due to expanded opera and ballet seasons. And there is no other theater in the environs with an adequately large stage and backstage area to accommodate large productions (see my recent Moscow Stanislavsky Ballet [review](#)). While I applaud the Flint Center for bringing the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, and with such a powerful program of "L'Après-midi d'une Faune," "Le Sacre du Printemps," and Bronislava Nijinska's "Les Noces," I am disappointed that live music could not be arranged, especially given the historical importance of these ballets.

The evening opens with "Les Noces," to the Stravinsky score. While the depiction of a Russian peasant wedding should at the very least stir up some emotions -- joy, loss, fear -- instead the dancers look wooden. Any attempts at showing feelings are mere superficial gestures. The cast needs coaching to find the inner sources of the varied emotions as well as demonstrating an understanding of the context, social and psychological, of the story. Though the current production was staged by Howard Sayette, who worked with Nijinska's daughter Irina in setting "Les Noces" for Oakland Ballet in 1981, something is missing and there is no way for me to know the when, where or why of it happening. Despite this lack, the total effect of Stravinsky's music, the sets and costumes by Nathalie Goncharova and Nijinska's choreography is stunning. With a stronger interpretation by the dancers it could be utterly brilliant.

"L'Après-midi d'une Faune" suffers from the same problem of presentation. Diaghilev had the genius for bringing together all the elements of a ballet -- music, decor and choreography -- and this one to Claude Debussy's composition

of the same name with the Leon Bakst scenery and costumes and Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography is a perfect example. Again, the dancers are merely doing the steps. Domingo Rubio, as the Faune, is naughty, but verging on the vulgar. I imagine a creature that is half human would have a sensuality that has animal power yet with an innocence, an unselfconsciousness. The nymphs need to show both a curiosity about the Faune and a hint of attraction to him, while also being frightened of his interest in them.

There is always the question about how close is Millicent Hodson's reconstruction of Nijinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps" to the original 1913 version. Since there is no way to answer it really, no one alive today who knew the original to compare it with the reconstruction, I won't delve into it. Again, the Diaghilev magic works. Stravinsky's music, now considered one of the most important 20th-century masterpieces, decor and costumes after Nicholas Roerich, reconstructed and supervised by Kenneth Archer, and choreography by Nijinsky, are very intense. And again, the dancers disappoint. They need to show a primitive earthiness, an underlying brutality overlaid with ritualistic spirituality. The most important role is that of the Chosen One. I can still see Beatriz Rodriguez, now long retired from the company, in my mind's eye, dancing with a divine desperation, an orgasmic ecstasy that transcended her sacrificial death. But where is that kind of passion in the current cast?

I am very grateful for the opportunity to see these masterpieces from the early 20th century once more, as they are certainly seminal for so much of the choreography that followed. But there is more to them than the physical preservation that one sees and hears. The current productions also need to capture the spirit, the emotional content or the essence of meaning that each ballet initially had. The Joffrey Ballet of Chicago is important for trying to keep this legacy alive; it has done the same with the works of Frederick Ashton. Young dancers and choreographers of today need these lessons in the history of dance so that they can place their own work within a greater context and not believe unawares that they are so unique and innovative.