

St. Petersburg Ballet dazzles with 'Romeo and Juliet'

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The playbill simply called it a ballet.

But with a strong infusion of square elbows and other Martha Graham-like moves, modern ballet might have been a better characterization.

The St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre's production of "Romeo and Juliet," Tuesday night at the Overture Center, dazzled on a myriad of fronts.

But perhaps no more so than in its choreography.

For more than two hours, with an edginess befitting the dark tale of teenage passion and death, the troupe of three dozen dancers wove continuously, and seamlessly, between classical and modern moves.

One moment Maria Yakshanova, as Juliet, was leaping and spinning classically on pointe. The next second that same pointe shoe was sharply thrust, with a bent knee, into the stage floor with a decidedly contemporary feel.

As Yakshanova and Alexey Petrov, as Romeo, shared a romantic, classically danced private moment, a corps of dancers in body suits surrounded them with what looked like vintage 1940s Graham film footage.

While some costumes, particularly those worn by males, were Renaissance-like, others like Mab's black, cut-out body suit were strikingly 21st century.

The company, under the direction of Artistic Director Yuri Petukhov, has built a repertoire of modern and classical ballet works.

Company members showed Tuesday night, to a brimming house, that they know how to mesh the styles.

They also showed they simply know how to move and how to act, demonstrating a mastery of both the dancing and dramatic skills needed to pull off a weighty story.

No one on stage, however, was more on top of their game than Yakshanova.

From the moment the agile wisp of a dancer took to the stage with her nurse (played by a male in drag) in a tender, funny duet, Yakshanova's theatrical talent was evident.

But it was later, in her grief-stricken reaction to her brother's death, that that talent rose to near brilliance in an awe-inspiring, tragic solo moment.

Anastasia Filipcheva's seductively evil portrayal of Mab also deserves praise. Small dramatic touches, like wiping her mouth after fatally kissing Romeo, and callously tossing away the hand of a seemingly dead Juliet, were memorable.

There were plenty of other things to like, as well, including the creepy feel lent by smoke and tall torches, one scene's blood-red lighting and the use of rolling wheels, swings and other oversized props.

The corps of street dancers was joyfully cohesive, flirting and playing in a way that made you feel this really was a band of young friends. Given that this is a traveling dance troupe, perhaps they are, and that really showed.

Two other triumphs of the evening were both by men -- Vladimir Dorokhin as Mercutio and an unfortunately unidentified dancer as nurse of Juliet. Both pulled off a series of difficult turns while dressed as women in long, heavy dresses.

The evening's one disappointment, however, was the audience, which failed to give this visiting troupe the full standing ovation it richly deserved.

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