

National Ballet turns romantic classic into hometown triumph

Karen Kain and company's Giselle is a wonder to watch

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GISELLE & POLYPHONIA

The National Ballet of Canada

The Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts

Through Sept. 29, 8 p.m.

Tickets \$27 - \$75

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The National Ballet of Canada dance Giselle as if they mean it. That's the simple secret that lifts the old chestnuts off the page and makes them more than lithographs come to life. That Giselle is not simply a relic of the Romantic age, but at 166 years the oldest surviving ballet still regularly performed, speaks to its witchy and enduring power.

The National's version, by Peter Wright (after the original variously credited to Coralli, Perrot and Petipa) exploits that power to the fullest. Revisionist versions of Giselle exist a-plenty: Mats Eks sets his for the Culberg Ballet in an insane asylum, and the Dance Theatre of Harlem perform theirs in the dank bayous of Louisiana.

But Wright's Giselle is autumnal and misty in the traditional way, with a cold wind of truth whistling through it. In look (the designs are by Desmond Heeley) and conception it brings to mind librettist Theophile Gautier's original inspiration, a passage from Heinrich Heine that describes "sprites in white gowns with hems that are perpetually damp."

In Giselle these sprites are Wilis, ghosts of girls betrayed before their wedding days, who as haunted brides rise at night from their graves to dance men to their death. This remains great stuff, and opening night on Wednesday featured a cast that honoured the ballet with intelligent, frequently transcendent dance readings.

Vancouver raised and trained Chan Hon Goh performed the eponymous role. At the peak of her considerable technical and expressive powers at age 38, Goh gave a seamless performance that revealed deeply worked original choices. Her silent film star approach was matched by Guillaume Cote's naturalistic reading of Albrecht, the nobleman posing as a peasant whose betrayal of Giselle fuels the plot line. His high, clear, beating legs in the Act 2 solo in which he dances for his life showed us a heart breaking, not mere technique, and in their lifts he and Goh achieved an effect seldom realized, a ghostly girl floating through space, briefly caught mid-air.

Piotr Stanczyk made the thankless role of Hilarion, the bumpkin who actually loves Giselle (and is so unfairly drowned for his devotion) into something emphatic and tragic, and Heather Ogden was a singular Myrtha, queen of the Wilis. From her very first pivots in arabesque, heels grinding angrily into the earth and her hard little face above, there's no doubt about it: she's mad and she's mean. Her retinue of jilted brides wear dresses that show the dirt of the graves they've just crawled out of, in contrast to the newly dead Giselle in pristine white, just one example of the keen attention to detail that characterizes the whole production.

David Briskin conducted the company's touring orchestra in Adolphe Adam's made-to-measure score, gloriously built for dancing in the old way.

National Ballet artistic director Karen Kain, a fine Giselle herself in her day, brings us a company that looks to be in excellent form, the men in particular stronger and more articulate than they were last time we saw them. But the evening was Goh's, transformed from the skinny kid who won all the prizes into a mature artist of depth and authenticity. Family and friends turned out to cheer the hometown girl who did Vancouver proud on Wednesday night.

The program opened with Christopher Wheeldon's Polyphonia. Made on the New York City Ballet in 2001 during the British-born Wheeldon's years there as choreographer in residence, Polyphonia is a ballet that pays homage to City Ballet genius George Balanchine. But unlike so many Balanchine-inspired dance makers, Wheeldon at no time mistakes story-less for meaningless. Set on a cast of eight to a suite of 10 piano compositions by Gyorgy Ligeti, his Polyphonia is a beautifully modulated set of distinct, resonant dance encounters. First soloist Bridgett Zehr stood out as the work's shining centre. She takes her turn as Giselle on Friday night.