

National Ballet does romance with a capital R

Louise Phillips

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GISELLE AND POLYPHONIA

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Tickets: 604-280-3311

Chan Hon Goh came home to Vancouver this week and scored a triumph as Giselle. Willowy and weightless, she claimed ownership of the role that one critic has called the ballerina's Hamlet but whose first act is more akin to the demise of Ophelia. Goh was guileless and winsome off the top, went heartbreakingly mad by intermission, and returned in the second act as a ghostly vision whose feet seemed rarely earthbound.

Romantic ballet with a capital R, Giselle aims right at the audience's emotions. First performed in 1841, it's pure fantasy with the beautiful jilted heroine, her dashing duplicitous lover, and the obligatory "white act" of supernatural ballerinas.

Giselle is one of the National Ballet's signature pieces and was a huge success when Karen Kain, now artistic director, danced the lead over 30 years ago. Despite the ballet's age and its hallowed place in the company's repertoire, it feels fresh enough in this 2004 version, choreographed by Sir Peter Wright.

Mist-draped forests and cuckoo-clock architecture are wildly atmospheric, courtesy of designer Desmond Heeley and lighting whiz Gil Wechsler. They offset the incongruously jolly parts of Adolphe Adam's score (think fluffy, un-subtle Tchaikovsky), orchestrated by George Crum and conducted by David Briskin. Heeley's costumes still look spanking new, from the pretty dirndls and lace-up bodices of the peasant girls, to the gaudy silks and velvets of the Holbein-style nobles.



CREDIT:

Giselle aims right at the audience's emotions.

Even the creaky convention of mime gets a facelift from the principal dancers when they aren't earning applause with wave after awesome wave of grands jetés, travelling arabesques and pretty supported balances.

The dancing should carry the show and most of it shone on Wednesday (a different set of principals dances each performance). A fitting partner for the ephemeral Chan Hon Goh, Guillaume Côté was impressive and controlled dancing Albrecht, Giselle's noble admirer. His acting raised two-timing Albrecht from cad to caring, if misled, young man. Heather Ogden's impassive Myrtha, queen of the unwed-undead Wilis, had a wobbly start but pulled off disciplined bourrées in the rest of the scene (Wilis are more ladylike than vampires, but just as fatal).

Wright's choreography seems true to the tradition of Perrot-Coralli-Petipa, favouring corps and principals equally. The supernatural scene is all about illusion: high jumps make the dancers fly and high lifts make the ballerinas float. Almost silent feet made the corps ethereal, and their poses on pointe made them seem weightless. Yet they were creepily implacable as they ensnared first the woodsman Hilarion, then Albrecht.

There was a nice touch as the dawn light broke and the Wilis faded into the forest. Giselle dropped a lily for Albrecht to find. Perfect love, the gesture seemed to say, is not an illusion. You can't get more romantic than that, with or without a capital R.

The curtain raiser for the evening was Christopher Wheeldon's Polyphonia, a 2001 work for New York City Ballet, set to 10 piano pieces by the avant-garde Hungarian composer György Ligeti and recorded by Toronto-based Andrew Burashko. The title means "many sounds" and here the music serves as a formal structure on which to explore different contemporary moves simultaneously. Four couples dressed in simple purple leotards danced 10 piquant short scenes in about half an hour. They made an elegant counterpoint to the lavish and traditional Giselle that followed.