



Husband-and-wife duo make sparks in 'Giselle'

REVIEW

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The tutus were out in full force Saturday night at Bridges Auditorium in Claremont, as Inland Pacific Ballet mounted a particularly winsome version of "Giselle," the 19th century classic tale of romance, death, jilted maidens and the supernatural. First staged in 1999 by the company's artistic director, Victoria Koenig, and Janek Schergen, the former ballet master with the Royal Swedish Ballet, this production is elegant, sweet and bursting with heart – a worthy part of the 13-year-old troupe's repertoire.

That its lead dancers – Sarah Spradlin as the titular doomed damsel and Christopher Bonomo as the two-timing royal cad, Albrecht – are real-life husband and wife makes for some palpable chemistry, the requisite ingredient for any "Giselle" to succeed. Shy, innocent and suitably bumpkin-like (if a bumpkin could have an elegant line, acquit herself airily and go mad before dropping dead of a broken heart), Spradlin's Giselle also triumphs as a ghost in Act 2, her trailing limbs an ethereal vision in the tragic mists of the graveyard scene.

Bonomo, though somewhat thick-waisted, has good elevation and rapidly beating feet, and he partners Spradlin as if to the balletic manner born. Stephanie Orza's Myrtha, queen of the spectral Wilis, is all guts and grit. Indeed, her fierce portrayal boasts an uncommonly high element of OCD: obsessive-compulsive dancing. Bullet-like in her delivery, this Patti LuPone doppelganger rules over her unforgiving, man-hating girls like a drill sergeant on pointe, her goth lips and searing stare contrasting with her airborne presence.

And no "Giselle" is worth its tulle without a fine corps. Sixteen phantoms who die before their wedding nights, these women moved in crisp unison, making magic with every hop, turn and cocked head, bringing Adolphe Adam's lyrically beautiful score (heard on tape) to mystical life. Jennifer Friel and Elizabeth LaPenas as Myrtha's attendants also flitted fittingly about in their demi-solos.

Credit too must go to Ricky Lizalde and Jeanne Nolden's superb costuming: From luxe velvets draped on the nobles to the exquisite layering of the Wilis' romantic tutus – the latter giving new meaning to the word "waft" – this garb added to the fairy-tale feel of the piece. Daniel Nyiri's sets also pleased, a hanging-autumn-leaf motif capturing the charm of Giselle's country village, the spooky cemetery design abetted by Greta Welsh's pristine lighting.

Other notables in the hardworking cast: a swoon-worthy Eric Shah as Giselle's suitor, Hilarion; the fine Franceska Hughes mimetically empowering Giselle's mother; and resident guest artist Daniel Kirk dutifully deployed as Albrecht's squire.

It's not every regional troupe that can render this masterpiece with such liquid grace, but Koenig and company have made the trip to the Inland Empire worthwhile.

Get thee, then, to Claremont and catch it while you can.

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