



Inland Pacific's 'Mermaid' makes Big Splash!

REVIEW

By Jennifer Cho Salaff

March 2, 2004

Pasadena Star News,

Inland Valley Daily

Bulletin

Inland Pacific Ballet's "The Little Mermaid" is not just a children's production. Though the majority of the audience will be young girls -- scores of Girl Scouts, Brownie and Daisy troops showed up for Saturday's sold-out opening performance at Bridges Auditorium in Claremont -- the ballet's universal themes of love, sacrifice, devotion and living out your dreams won't be lost on an adult audience.

A colorful cast of underwater characters, dreamy set design and imaginative costumes will contribute to a memorable entertainment experience for all ages.

From the moment the red velvet curtains opened Saturday, audience members knew they were going to take part in a magical, underwater adventure. The stage was transformed into a gigantic Monterey Bay aquarium: giant coral sparkled in the background as a wonderful array of creatures -- shrimp, sea horses, schools of fish, a lobster and a few tunas -- frolicked together. Two jellyfish characters, depicted by dancers carrying white, opalescent umbrellas, added to the scene's enchanting quality with their quick, graceful movements.

The Little Mermaid, played by Idaho native Jennifer Friel (in her second year as the title character) bursts on stage to play with her underwater friends. The 26-year-old Friel proved she was perfectly cast as the innocent, idealistic young mermaid who dreams about a life above the water. Friel captures the Mermaid character on all levels: physically (at 5-foot-2, she is the smallest of the mermaid sisters), technically (the mermaid's independent spirit is communicated through Friel's mastery over the choreography) and theatrically (without overdoing it, Friel has the acting down). The young mermaid has a playful relationship with her five sisters (played by Jennifer Hickey, Ashley Mohadjer, Amanda Lindholm, Laura Vail and Chris Stauber), who share stories of their experiences at the surface. Four of her siblings share exciting tales. One sister warns the Little Mermaid of danger above the water. The mermaid's father, the Sea King (Steven Voznick), gives his blessing to the Little Mermaid to visit the surface on her 15th birthday. All the sea creatures dance in celebration as the young mermaid swims to the top of the ocean.

The story line flows at a quick pace, thanks to a sound collage that includes the music of Maurice Ravel, Benjamin Britten, Antonin Dvorak and Claude Debussy. Once at the surface, the Mermaid meets a temperamental sea gull (Darrell Haire). Haire, who wowed audiences last year as the Nutcracker doll, does a nice job portraying the finicky bird. You almost feel like he is floating above the ocean as he flaps his graceful wings. Enjoying her adventures, the Little Mermaid swims near a ship where a young Prince (Chris Bonomo) and his fellow sailors are surveying the sea. A storm takes over, the men are thrown overboard and the

Mermaid attempts to save the Prince. The shipwreck scene is set up by dark lighting, the sounds of wind and rain and long panels of blue fabric that rise and fall like ocean waves.

A highlight of the production is an underwater scene between the Mermaid and the Prince. Friel and Bonomo hang from spinning ropes as they recreate a near-drowning. The transition from dancing on stage to swinging in the air was smooth, considering it took a few dancers to help the lead characters get on the slings. There was the risk of getting tangled, but the dancers managed avoiding any mishaps by making it look easy and natural. After she delivers the Prince from disaster, the Little Mermaid realizes she is in love and wants to join the Prince in his world.

The dark music of Ralph Vaughan Williams sets the tone for the Mermaid's journey to see the Sea Witch (Kelly Lamoureux), who she hopes will give her legs. Another casting success is Lamoureux as the sinister Sea Witch. The Riverside dancer's Witch towers over Friel's Mermaid. Lamoureux portrays the role with graceful movements and an element of danger and uncertainty. The Witch's white make-up and dark purple/black costume add to the overall effect. The Mermaid agrees to the Witch's condition that she sacrifice her voice in exchange for legs. She wakes up in front of the Prince's castle and delights in her new form. She is no longer a mermaid and now a human. But when she tries to explain her story to the Prince, she realizes she can't speak.

Though the two can't communicate through words, they reveal their love in a beautiful pas de deux set to Claude Debussy's "Dances for Harp - Sacree et Profane." Bonomo demonstrates his athleticism and grace in the countless times he lifts and twirls Friel, who looks like a ballerina in a music box. There is a wonderful chemistry between the two dancers, who make the relationship between the Mermaid and Prince believable. At the end of the ballet, the Mermaid almost loses her Prince to the Little Dark Haired Girl (a character who comes to the Prince's aid after the Mermaid saves him), but regains her voice and wins his love.

The libretto doesn't follow the Hans Christian Andersen tale (the Mermaid dies in Andersen's classic story), and instead opts for a "happily ever after" ending as the Prince transforms into a merman and joins the Mermaid and her underwater friends at the bottom of the ocean.

IPB's "The Little Mermaid" has plenty to offer its audiences. Whether it's pure dance, a romantic story or 90 minutes of pure fantasy, this original production delivers on all levels.

###