

Ballet's 'Swan Lake' remains delightful

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BALLET REVIEW

“Swan Lake”

Oct. 23 through Nov. 2. Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre, 2800 Cobb Galleria Parkway. 404-817-8700, www.atlantaballet.com.

Atlanta Ballet doesn't hide the cold fact of recent hard times, partly because it survived them and is poised to prosper. A year shy of its 80th anniversary, the nation's oldest ballet company opened its season with the fairy-tale opulence of John McFall's "Swan Lake." Thursday night, however, they first acknowledged the turn of fortune.

Part of that reversal comes from the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre, a dance-friendly space where the ballet is a resident company. Part comes from Executive Director Barry Hughson, hired almost two years ago to professionalize the organization. He managed to retire the crushing debt and, in remarks from the stage, thanked the two generous patrons who footed the bill to restore an orchestra and conductor in the pit, ending the ballet's humiliation of dancing the classics to recorded music.

Onstage, much remains the same. The curtain opened on "Swan Lake," which premiered in 2005, with essentially the same dancers in the same key roles.

McFall, the company's artistic director, has his own variation on the traditional story line, one that is itself a patchwork but indelibly fused with the imperial Russian choreography.

In time-honored tradition, McFall simplifies to accommodate his dancers' strengths. He gives his disciplined male corps almost as much to do as the women. To streamline everyone's motivation, he elevates the dastardly von Rothbart (Jonah Hooper, lanky and not quite menacing) to the story's prime mover, the sorcerer who turns lovely maidens into swans.

Attuned to Tchaikovsky's score, McFall also retains what's gorgeous about the 19th century conception when it can't be bettered. The scenes of 16 white swans, en pointe in the mist by the lake, arms gracefully stroking the air in imaginary flight, taps some primal image of what ballet can accomplish — where physically arduous gestures and extreme body contortions are made to look sublimely effortless. Such beauty never fails to give a shiver.

Still, the two charismatic women principals dominate our attention and our affection. Christine Winkler's White Swan, so expressive, so guarded in her exuberance for the love duets in her first encounter with the Prince, doesn't convey the same intensity when she's despairing near the end.

Kristine Necessary smiles an awful lot as the Black Swan and, a formidable talent, delivers the evening's most brilliant moves.

To my eye, Christian Clark, as Prince Siegfried, partnered well with the women but on his own never adequately submerged technique into expression: You appreciated a thrilling, from-the-hip twirling leap and noted when he was trying to emote, but these remained distinct actions.

Many of the smaller roles were brilliantly realized. Brian Wallenberg's Benno, for example, an adolescent in love, spends most of his time either off the ground or with a leg swung above his waist. Like the evening as a whole, a delight.