

'Romeo and Juliet' speak volumes without words

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For the Journal-Constitution
Published on: 02/09/2008

Romantic and richly textured, the Atlanta Ballet's "Romeo and Juliet" is a valentine not for the faint of heart. This production is decidedly mature, with dark scenes, lots of physical violence and, of course, a devastating ending. Much of the performance is nothing short of emotionally riveting, an impressive feat accomplished without the use of Shakespeare's poignant words.

The leads reveal considerable acting skills as they gesture, lift and leap their way through the story's complex plot and themes. Thankfully, British-born choreographer Michael Pink is adept at using movement to develop characters and deepen the ballet's emotional context. This is a refreshing choreographic technique as many creators of classical ballet rely on pantomime to tell the story, then insert dance as a fancy afterthought.



Charlie McCullers

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Romeo (John Welker) and Juliet (Christine Winkler) head toward their tragic end in a riveting and dark portrayal by the Atlanta Ballet.

One scene — Mercutio's death — is both humorous and heart-wrenching as the other characters assume their charming friend is pretending to be injured. Unsteadiness blends seamlessly into more traditional choreography, and the crowd moves with him, creating an atmosphere that is both supportive and worrisome. Brian Wallenberg is a brilliant Mercutio, cocky, gracefully human and subtly raunchy. As a dancer Wallenberg's talent is matched only by the other male leads, Jacob Bush (Benvolio) and John Welker (Romeo). Together, the three men are pure excitement, moving with the energy of young and joyous friends.

The women deserve equal recognition. Christine Winkler delivers a stunning performance as Juliet. Her character begins as an innocent, annoyingly sweet teenage girl and morphs into an emotionally complex woman broken by love and pain. In a scene rivaling Mercutio's death, Juliet dances with Paris, her arranged and unwanted husband-to-be. The choreography is similar, if not identical, to a scene in the first act when Juliet has not yet met Romeo. But this time her face is ashen, her limbs graceful but subdued by the knowledge that she will never marry this man and does not love him.

Though not cast in one of the lead roles, newcomer Peng-Yu Chen shines with her beautiful extension and lightning-quick feet. Courtney Necessary is a tortured Lady Capulet, unfortunately with a minimum dancing role but an incredible grief scene in the third act.

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As the two star-crossed lovers, Winkler and Welker have glorious chemistry and an obvious affinity toward one another as dancers. In an especially poignant and choreographically amazing duet, Romeo discovers Juliet's lifeless body and begins to dance with her. In a costume of flowing white gossamer, Winkler is lifted and tossed, her body gracefully suggesting the lost promise of love.

Despite the success of the second and third acts, much of Act I is confusing, both visually and intellectually. A rash of colors and fabrics clutter the stage as the townspeople gather to dance, then fight, then dance again. The apparent aim is to establish the two warring families — the Montagues and the Capulets — but the result is a frantic and much-too-long mess.

Pink's choreographic talents lie in storytelling and realistic character development, not editing. This is a long ballet — almost three hours — but the heartbreaking romance is well worth it. Sit next to someone you love.

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DANCE REVIEW "Romeo and Juliet"

2 and 8 p.m Saturday; 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday; 8 p.m. Thursday-Feb. 16. Presented by Atlanta Ballet. Fox Theatre. 404-817-8700. www.atlantaballet.com

Bottom line: A long, heartbreaking classic, beautifully danced.