

Fall 2016

Ballet Review

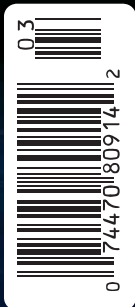


figure out who's zoomin' who, is played out in a bladder-bursting, sixty-eight-minute first act that ends with a slow-motion stampede of gray-haired octogenarians heading for the nearest bathroom. The second act, at a mere thirty-two minutes, might as well be a separate ballet altogether for it is simply a series of divertissements and pas de deux in front of a backdrop that seems a mere afterthought. No scrim, no magical undersea world of Jacques Cousteau, no story left to tell. We might as well be rehashing every nineteenth-century ballet ever created.

On the dancing end of things, Simone Messmer and Kleber Rebello as first-cast Titiana and Oberon were their usual fantastic selves. Tricia Albertson and Rainer Krenstetter danced the long pas de deux that opens act 2 with an understated elegance that I cannot recall ever seeing on Albertson, a nineteen-year veteran of MCB who has looked scared and strained as of late, but who seemed to have turned a Margot Fonteyn corner here. I wonder if it was her pairing with Krenstetter, the Austrian who joined MCB in 2014 who generally partners Messmer. Whatever the reasons, I hope we see more of this version of Albertson next season.

Other highlights? Christie Sciturro, an eight-year corps de ballet captive, danced Hippolyta with an attack and clarity that had me shaking my head and wondering, "Where did this girl come from? And why don't we see more of her?"

Structural issues aside, this new *Midsummer* is a remarkable achievement and a testament to just how dynamic Lourdes Lopez is as a director, bringing in local Miami artists who have genuine talent and vision and allowing them to put their imprimatur on the work of George Balanchine, the man who remains this company's oracle.

Lastly, I cannot conclude my review of this ambitious, thirtieth-anniversary season without mentioning the retirement of Jennifer Carlynn Kronenberg. Having danced for twenty-two years at MCB, she was a second-cast Titiana while her husband, Carlos Miguel

Guerra, played her Cavalier. Kronenberg continues to be the consummate actress, a stage presence among the Miami City Ballet principals that one does not easily come by, and she will be sorely missed. Sadly, I did not see Mr. Guerra when he was younger and while he danced quite a bit this season it seems appropriate now for him to move on, a frightening prospect for any ballet dancer but in particular for two dancers whose entire existence – financially, artistically, and emotionally – is that world. We should all wish them well

New York

Karen Greenspan

Lest we forget – not all societies allow dancing, or even the viewing of dance. There are modern-day regimes and societies that forbid this innate human birthright of physically embodied expression. In the Islamic Republic of Iran it is illegal to dance and it is punishable by imprisonment. Richard Raymond's film *Desert Dancer* is based on the true story of Afshin Ghaffarian and his circle of friends who resist this unnatural repression by forming an underground dance company in Tehran. The screening was a powerful conclusion to the 2016 Live Ideas Festival that focused on the Middle East and North Africa region at New York Live Arts.

The film (and the underlying story) tugs and twists every heartstring as it takes the viewer on this roller coaster journey. We meet Ghaffarian, the young Iranian schoolboy, who discovers he loves to dance after viewing some contraband American DVDs with dance sequences. He is punished for sharing his innocent passion in school (he demonstrates the moves he has been practicing at home for his classmates), but is later pulled aside and mentored by the prerevolution-minded school principal who runs an arts organization in secret.

Fast forward: Ghaffarian, now a freshman student at the University of Tehran, during the height of the excitement surrounding the 2009 Iranian presidential election, is seized by

the political energy of the time. He inspires a small circle of coeds to form an underground dance group in direct defiance of Iran's first Charter of Citizens' Rights, which denies artistic freedom of expression. They train themselves by hacking into YouTube and learning from the very best – Michael Jackson, Pina Bausch, Rudolf Nureyev, Gene Kelly. Reveling in the shared experience of physicality and creative expression, Ghaffarian declares, "When I dance, I feel free."

Eventually, training is not enough – they want to perform in public. This would not only endanger themselves, but also the audience members. Ghaffarian proposes they drive two hundred miles out into the desert, away from the watchful eyes of the Basij (civilian religious militia), to perform amidst the sand dunes. They supply their own audience by inviting close friends and providing transportation. There is grave tension surrounding the possibility that they may have been betrayed to the Basij, but the performance is a success, creating an aura of elation and hope in the desert landscape of limitless space. The Moroccan Sahara provided the actual location for the golden-duned backdrop.

When Ghaffarian turns out for a rally in protest of the rigged election results and is caught recording the events, he is arrested, harshly beaten, and brought in for trial. While awaiting his trial, he manages to escape to Paris and immediately subs for another performer in a Paris theater. Mid-performance, Ghaffarian breaks ranks and steps downstage to perform a dance solo with spoken words stating his circumstances and begging for asylum. It is here that the supreme talent of British-Bangladeshi choreographer Akram Khan (responsible for the film's choreography) and the ideal casting of Reece Ritchie as Afshin Ghaffarian pack the punch.

Up until this point, the dancing and choreography intentionally looks hokey because the members of the troupe are not supposed to be trained dancers, nor are they practiced choreographers – and that is appropriate. But in Ghaffarian's danced plea for asylum, Akram

Khan has intuitively reached into his classical Indian dance roots, creating a hero's solo that volleys between the silenced and the silencer, the beaten and the oppressor. He eloquently renders Ghaffarian's harrowing experience by using the storytelling technique of portraying multiple characters as they relate to each other that is common in classical Indian dance. And Ritchie pulls it off well. Khan has succeeded in creating a dance that expresses the message within the capabilities of this actor/performer. My guess is this is due to some of his previous projects with non-dancers.

The film occasionally falls into the sentimentality trap with Freida Pinto's character, who is Ghaffarian's dance partner and heroin-addicted love interest. This was also the case with parts of Benjamin Wallfisch's score, which piled heavy-handed emotionality on the already drama-filled scenes. In spite of this, *Desert Dancer* is a stirring hero's journey with all the necessary ingredients – passion, conflict, politics, romance, dreams, danger, suffering, and transcendence.

Director Richard Raymond was present to share some stories about his meetings with Afshin Ghaffarian, Akram Khan, and the making of the film. He recounted that the screening of the film at a festival in Jordan had to be cancelled two hours before the event because of a threat by Hezbollah, lest we forget what it takes in some places – just to dance.

San Francisco

Rachel Howard

In this age when international companies collect hot choreographers like blue chip painters, San Francisco Ballet artistic director Helgi Tomasson does a shrewd job of keeping up with the Joneses. This year saw the company acquire a re-choreographed Forsythe and premieres by Liam Scarlett and Justin Peck to add to its gallery of Ratmanskys and Wheeldons. But for all the high-buzz offerings, an untrendy Balanchine masterpiece marked the season's pinnacle. The company danced *Theme*



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