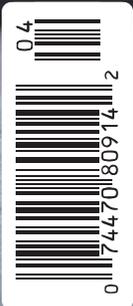


Winter 2016-2017

Ballet Review



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Winter 2016-2017**

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Cover photograph by Ann Ray, Paris Opera Ballet: Ludmila Pagliero and
Germain Louvet in William Forsythe's *Blake Works I*.

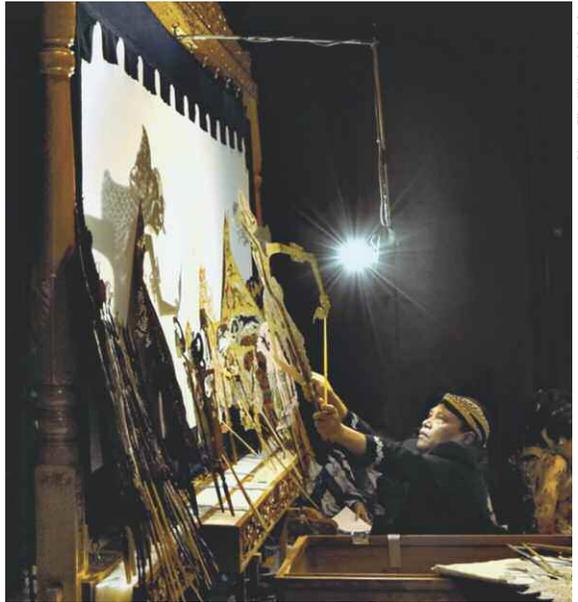
and unhappy critical reception the piece received, it's unlikely such a sellout will occur again when the work is brought back in a couple of seasons. The trouble is, success of ballets like Christopher Wheeldon's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that create visual worlds of imagination may be the reason choreographers are going after such huge productions. These productions veer away from the intentions of dance to provoke, entertain, and illuminate through the choreographic genius of dance makers who know how to use steps to tell a story.

In spite of what might be kindly considered good intentions, *Le Petit Prince* is a failure precisely because Michael Levine and Guillaume Côté, who share the creative concept for the piece, have been too interested in creating a vast canvas of theatrical frippery instead of a ballet that enchants through the use of dance – not millions of dollars' worth of effects. No doubt Côté worked hard to make something serious with *Le Petit Prince*. For the moment, however, it looks like he better keep his tights on and continue dancing. If this production is anything to go by, he's not ready to sit in that big choreographer's chair just yet.

New York

Karen Greenspan

The stage resembled a jewelry box brimming with beautifully arranged metallic delights as we entered the theater at Asia Society for the Javanese shadow play *The Story of Déwa Ruci* (Bima's Spiritual Enlightenment). The thirty-minute *talu*, or overture, that introduced this traditional performance form was already in play. Every inch of the stage was festooned with colorful carpets upon which were set the *gamelan* (melodic, percussion, ensemble music typical in Southeast Asia and Indonesia) instruments – metal gongs, bells, and xylophones of all sizes and shapes. The ensemble



Ki Midiyanto.

musicians, attired in paisley and floral Indonesian prints, were seated on the floor encircled by their instruments in what looked like percussion cubicles. Packed onto this bauble-filled stage were eighteen instrumentalists, eleven vocalists, platters of fruit and flower offerings, and an intricately carved, wooden, puppet stage raised about eighteen inches above the stage floor and positioned up-stage center. Rows of detailed shadow puppets made of leather and painted in gold leaf, black, red, and white were lined up waiting to dance the story of Déwa Ruci from the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*.

Wayang kulit is the Javanese art form of shadow play. Combining drama, philosophy, comedic improvisation, music, and dancing puppets, this ancient performing art form is more than a thousand years old and continues to be popular today in Java (one of the major islands of the nation of Indonesia). Like all performing arts in Indonesia, shadow play has its origin in ritual. The leather puppets, developed from paintings of the ancestors on temple walls, are considered to be “shadows of the ancestors” and were a form of ancestor worship.

The *dhalang* (shadow master) is the superstar of the event and is responsible for inte-

grating ancient myth, history, and timeless philosophical teachings with current issues, action, and humor. The repertory draws on the stories from the great Indian epics – the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The dhalang includes some humorous extemporizing on topical issues so that each performance is fresh and unique.

The story of Déwa Ruci, an episode from the *Mahabharata*, centers around Bima, one of the five Pandava brothers who were in conflict with their one hundred Kaurava cousins for the throne of Astina. Bima turns to their teacher Durna to learn about the meaning of life. In this story, the teacher sends Bima off to complete various ordeals. The story is cherished as one of the deepest philosophical selections from the wayang repertory as it deals with central aspects of the Javanese belief system. In the country of Indonesia, with the largest Muslim population in the world, this Javanese creation with ancient Indian roots was also adapted by a number of leading Islamic teachers, and even thought of as an Islamic-based mystical teaching – demonstrating how different belief systems share many basic themes and teachings as well as coexist and thrive together.

At the conclusion of the overture, Ki Midiyanto, an eleventh-generation dhalang who has logged in more than twenty years of international performances, walked onstage wearing a sarong, black jacket, and a black and gold turban and sat on the floor in front of the puppet stage. Once the music stopped, he turned around to face the puppets and puppet stage; a large golden dagger protruded from the back of his waistband. He began singing in his mellow tenor voice and grasped the extra-large, ornate puppet that occupied the center of the puppet stage. This most important piece is called the Tree of Life (*Kayonan*) and represents the creation of life which is about to occur in the course of the performance. He twirled it off the stage and then positioned two character puppets ready to be brought to life. He sang what sounded like an invocation as all the instruments played very softly. When

he finished, the percussion grew louder and quicker, filling in the acoustic space.

Dhalang Midiyanto sang and spoke the distinctive voices of all the puppet characters frequently diverging from the Javanese storyline to ad lib a bit of political humor in English. He manipulated the multijointed puppet figures with high-energy flips, twirls, and leaps through endless battle scenes with great flourishes. Then he killed each poor character off with all manner of weapons, tossing the figures to the floor and shouting out sound effects like a little boy, surrounded by his action figures, caught up in his imaginary world of play.

The dhalang was sitting cross-legged next to a wooden puppet box that he frequently hit with a wooden mallet (held in his free hand) to communicate with the musicians. He also tapped out rhythmic cues to the orchestra by using his foot to play bronze plates hanging down the side of the puppet box.

The gamelan music is what sets the scene and background for the drama. Gamelan Kusuma Laras (“Flowering Harmony”) a community-based Javanese gamelan ensemble, which for more than thirty years has performed in New York City, around the United States, and abroad, created exciting action, moods, and textures. The drummer I. M. Harjito, who directed the production, is a renowned Javanese musician as well as the artistic director of Gamelan Kusuma Laras. Along with mediating Midiyanto’s directives to the orchestra, he also amplified the puppet action with expressive, drummed sound effects. Guest vocalist Heni Savitri brought her artistry to the ocean of exotic sound.

The program notes explained that wayang performances are informal events, and the audience was encouraged to get up, meander onto the stage, and move about the performers to get various perspectives. Indeed, when you walked onstage and around the back, the view from the back side of the puppet stage was the true puppet play in shadow. The seated audience in the theater was actually watching the backstage business of creating the magic.



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