

ACT II: A second look at area stages — Dancing Shakespeare

By Hedy Weiss Theater Critic/hweiss@suntimes.com April 25, 2013 8:30PM



Ashley Wheater, JOFFREY BALLET
'OTHELLO'

When: Through May 5

Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress

Tickets: \$31-\$152

Info: (800) 982-2787; www.ticketmaster.com

Run time: 2 hours with two intermissions

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Choreographers of both classical ballet and modern dance have long found inspiration in Shakespeare. His plays have inspired many versions of “Romeo and Juliet,” as well as memorable takes on “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” “The Taming of the Shrew,” “Hamlet” and “The Tempest.”

It was the modern dance master Jose Limon who first tackled “Othello” in the form of a lean, elegant quartet that has long been a classic, “The Moor’s Pavane.” But in 1997, in a co-commission by American Ballet Theatre and the San Francisco Ballet, Chicago-bred choreographer Lar Lubovitch gave this tale of love, jealousy and betrayal, with its tension between Othello’s Islamic faith and Desdemona’s Catholic heritage, the full-length treatment. And in addition to drawing on Shakespeare’s drama, he found inspiration in “The Moor,” the 16th century Giraldi Cinthio story that Shakespeare worked from, as well as Verdi’s 1887 opera (which will be part of Lyric Opera’s next season).

In 2009, Lubovitch’s work — with its vivid, nontraditional set design by George Tsypin, digital projections of Venice and Cyprus by Wendall K. Harrington and original score by Elliot Goldenthal (played here by the outstanding Chicago Philharmonic) — became a major hit for the Joffrey. Following the current engagement at the Auditorium Theatre it will be retired from the company’s active repertory.

In a recent chat with **Ashley Wheater** (above), artistic director of the Joffrey, we talked about what makes this production special. Here are some of his observations:

Q. You were raised a proper English lad, so did you get the full Shakespeare education?

A. Yes I did. Many of his plays were done at school, and we often went up to London as a class to see Shakespeare productions. I also remember seeing the Zeffirelli film version of “Romeo and Juliet.” And I have wonderful memories of dancing Iago in Peter Darrell’s version of “Othello,” which was created for the Scottish Ballet and which we took on tour in Asia.

Q. Why do you think so many choreographers turn to Shakespeare's plays?

A. One reason is that his characters are just so sharply etched. And in the case of "Romeo and Juliet" it is the extraordinary Prokofiev score. With "Othello," our music director, Scott Speck, has worked closely with Elliot Goldenthal and has been able to bring out all its nuances. It has some wonderful motifs, and there is a real underlying surge of trouble in it.

Q. What attracted you to Lubovitch's "Othello"?

A. This was the first full-length ballet I introduced to the Joffrey rep, and it is certainly a masterwork of narrative dance. One of the most interesting things about it is the way Lar has used the language of classical ballet for the principals while giving the ensemble choreography in a more contemporary dance style. This also is reflected in the hybrid style of the sets and costumes.

Q. Lubovitch was with the company throughout the rehearsal period. What did he emphasize while coaching the dancers?

A. Above all he wanted them to understand that they were telling the story physically as opposed to acting it out. The characterizations come through bold contemporary movement rather than the sort of pantomime that can now seem old-fashioned, even hokey. For years it was considered sacrilege to get rid of mime, but if you really fulfill the movement, really invest a huge amount of internal emotion into it, the meaning carries over to the audience.

Q. Story ballets are popular with audiences, but what do they give to the dancers?

A. So often the Joffrey dancers perform in abstract pieces, and I think it is a great challenge to them to be able to develop a character over two full acts and really sustain the story as it evolves. And it changes the way the dancers interact on stage. Our audiences will see some truly risky, compelling performances by several different casts.

Q. Are there plans for some other story ballets in upcoming seasons?

A. We'll be doing "La Bayadere" in the fall, and maybe there will be a very unusual "Romeo and Juliet" by Krzysztof Pastor in the spring. And the dream is to do a new "Anna Karenina" in the future.