

Joffrey Ballet's 'Othello' positively stunning

By Hedy Weiss Theater Critic/hweiss@suntimes.com April 30, 2013 4:34PM



The Joffrey Ballet in "Othello," featuring Christine Rocas, Dylan Gutierrez and Victoria Jaiani. | PHOTO BY CHERYL MANN

The Joffrey Ballet
in 'Othello'

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

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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And you thought "Othello" was all about Shakespeare's language. Think again. As the Joffrey Ballet is so brilliantly demonstrating in its fiercely realized revival of choreographer Lar Lubovitch's dramatic masterpiece, dance may very well be the most direct, powerful, emotionally devastating medium through which to tell this story of envy, betrayal, resentment and (most notably) the way men, furious at the success of other men, vent their rage on the women who love them.

"Othello," which runs through May 5 at the Auditorium Theatre, shows the company in all its glory, and serves as a reminder of what the Joffrey has, throughout its history, done best, which is to spin characters out of movement. This also is unquestionably the finest work created by Lubovitch, who turned 70 in April — one that has the full sweep, as well as all the corrosive psychological twists of the Shakespeare tragedy, as well as his other sources. In addition, as played by the impeccable Chicago Philharmonic, Elliot Goldenthal's score for the work — percussive, volatile, driving — serves as a modern, cinematic, impressively nuanced "partner" for this ballet that unspools in three airtight, breathtaking acts.

The impact can be felt from the start — with the first thunderous crash of the music, followed by the sight of the triumphant Venetian general, Othello, the Moor (in a remarkable portrayal by Dylan Gutierrez, a tall, handsome rising star in the company). He is on his knees in prayer as a Muslim, but is then joined by his worshipful Catholic bride, Desdemona (the ever-breathtaking Victoria Jaiani, stepping on pointe, in almost ghostlike fashion), who arrives at the altar.

Later we see a vividly revealing duet between another married couple. Iago (in a chillingly controlled, knife-sharp portrayal by Temur Suluashvili), is insanely jealous because he has been overlooked by Othello in favor of Cassio (the boyishly buoyant, muscular Derrick Agnoletti) for a promotion. He exhibits his rage and frustration by brushing off every entreaty from his adoring wife, Emilia (Christine Rocas, in an exquisitely subtle and passionate performance). Their duet outstrips language at every turn.

And there is more. When Iago plants the seed of jealousy in Othello by making him think there is something going on between Desdemona and Cassio, you think back to the scene where she — a girlishly happy new bride — has danced with full out joy with this young man who could easily be her brother or cousin or former schoolmate. So it makes sense.

Lubovitch churns up the aura of sexual tension with the arrival of the gypsylike woman of Cyprus, Bianca (the zesty Yumelia Garcia), and he turns the ensemble into a marvelous, almost oceanic chorus that seems to echo the stormy tides of the story.

The alternation of classical and modern movement, combined with the stunningly modern mix of designer George Tsypin's fractured glass sets and Wendell K. Harrington's realistic, ever-shifting projections enhance the tension that propels this story in which everyone is broken in the end. To be sure this ballet is far more than "a tale about a handkerchief." See it before it departs from the Joffrey's repertory.