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IN PERFORMANCE 'Othello' 4 stars

Review: Nonstop dancing no tragedy in this 'Othello' Shakespearean ballet makes glorious return to Auditorium Theatre

to Auditorium Theatre



The Joffrey Ballet's "Othello" will be at Auditorium Theatre through May 5.

By Sid Smith, Special to the Tribune
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Drenched in darkness and horror, "Othello," one of the best acquisitions of the Joffrey Ballet during its time in Chicago, is back at the Auditorium Theatre, the case of intoxicating dance fueled by the ugliest of human failings.

A fair complaint against most classic, full-length ballets is that they offer too little dance, what with all the pantomime padding and interminable peasant gamboling. But in "Othello," choreographer and Chicago native Lar Lubovitch never lets the dancing stop, a gripping if relentless cavalcade that's also classical technique tweaked and remade by Lubovitch's longtime leanings in modern dance. An early romp by Cassio, for instance, includes midair turns in which his leg and torso push a tad farther and harder than usual, just as the steely, creepy duet for Iago and Emilia that ends Act 1 is part classic pas de deux — her extended legs employed as stark geometry — and part psychodrama, seduction and sadism intermixed.

"Othello" boasts a kind of perpetual mechanism of metaphors, from the lifting and dipping of the women, as if they, too, were undulating handkerchiefs like the one at the center of the plot, to the interlocking hands that foreshadow strangulation. You know you're in for horror from the opening moment, with Othello curled up and then unfurling as if he were a monster about to leave his lair, not long before wedding guests spill out of the chapel more like writhing, interlaced worms than revelers. The Act 2 tarantella seems peopled by asylum inmates, and Othello and Desdemona end it all with a wrenching duet of homicide.

Wednesday's opening starred Fabrice Calmels as a towering, impassioned Othello, bronzed, heroic and deadly; April Daly as a sweet but strong Desdemona, her body stiff and yet magically acrobatic in certain key moments; sprightly, buoyant Aaron Rogers as Cassio; Matthew Adamczyk, fiendish and slithering as Iago and maybe in love with Othello, judging from a late duet during which Elliot Goldenthal's searing score briefly turns jazzy; and stately, naturally elegant Valerie Robin, cast against type but magnificent as Emilia, Iago's self-effacing punching bag and possibly the ballet's true hero.

Alas, this is Robin's farewell engagement, all the more reason to catch one of the performances with her in the role.

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