

S.F. Ballet's 'Othello' a spectacular
blending of traditional, radical dance

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JERRY TELFER / The Chronicle

Yuan Yuan Tan as Desdemona and Yuri Possokhov as Othello in San Francisco Ballet's "Othello."

Everything and Moor

By Octavio Roca
CHRONICLE DANCE CRITIC

A thrilling, glorious thing happened Tuesday night. In a single stroke, San Francisco Ballet unveiled the best dramatic ballet in its repertory, made musical history and offered dance lovers a profoundly moving experience.

The ovation that greeted the West Coast premiere of Lar Lubovitch's "Othello" at the War Memorial Opera House was long, loud and richly deserved. This one is a hit.

DANCE REVIEW

BALLET

OTHELLO: The ballet continues at the War Memorial Opera House through Sunday. Tickets: \$10-\$100. Call (415) 865-2000.

"Othello" is an unprecedented collaboration with the American Ballet Theatre, which danced the world premiere in New York in 1997. A season's worth of rethinking and subtle reshaping have made the San Francisco Ballet production more satisfying than the original — which was fine to begin with. This is a rare instance when New York had the out-of-town tryout, with the local staging the finished product.

Changes made here, including some in Eliot B. Goldenthal's luminous orchestration,

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will make their way to Lincoln Center in June when ABT revives "Othello." But it will be tough, there or anywhere, to top the excitement the San Francisco dancers created at their first meeting with Lubovitch's masterpiece.

Lubovitch speaks his own language and speaks it persuasively, with a strong American accent. His "Othello" is traditional in that it aims at enriching the canon rather than rejecting it. But it is also a radical dance, both in its negation of fashionable Balanchinean abstraction and its unembarrassed embrace of the theatrical values of modern dance.

Inspired at every step by Goldenthal's music, Lubovitch achieves archetypal ideals. He explores the universal themes of Shakespeare's tragedy with sympathy and clarity through movement that is always drenched in dramatic truth.

The truth was in the dancing. And the dancers, from corps to principals, were spectacular. From the ebb and flow of the corps in the violent storm that brings Othello to Desdemona, through the infernal tarantella of treachery in Act 2 and the inevitable tragedy at the end, the narrative flow was natural as it was devastating.

Vibrant Characterizations

The characterizations were vibrant. Yuri Possokhov was ravishing as Othello, an outsider to whom happiness must seem the most distant of hopes. Although his partnering in Act 1 seemed at first to lack the expected assurance and strength, Possokhov's dynamics grew with his character's jealousy. He was surprisingly vulnerable, too — in operatic terms, more Plácido Domingo than Jon Vickers as Othello, and just as touching. Othello's murderous mad scene, a choreographic alchemy of fluid classical technique and uniquely modern anguish, had the audience gasping.

Yuan Yuan Tan's Desdemona was subtle, almost daringly so. Playing the very image of innocence about to be brutalized, the San Francisco ballerina drew on her musicality and virtuosity in bringing to life the tragic futility of Desdemona's emotions. It was a triumph for dance and dancers alike that Desdemona's duets with Cassio emerged

as both utterly childlike and dangerously erotic.

It was easy, of course, to see why Othello would be jealous of Stephen Legate's Cassio, who was as attractive and exhilarating as he was blameless. Legate could invest a jump with such impossible glee that one could almost see Iago's hatred gathering around his flying figure. As Iago, David Palmer's jagged, angular precision will not be bettered. His evil was as strong as Desdemona's goodness, his duets with Othello terrifying, his cruelty and cunning as true as they were unsettling.

S.F. Ballet's Dancers

The rest of the ballet showed off San Francisco's dancers, from Julia Adam's tortured Emilia through the beautiful Claudia Alfieri in what could be the thankless role of the prostitute Bianca. Guennadi Nedviguine and Marisa Lopez stood out among the Commedia dancers, Kester Cotton, Askia Swift and Steve Coutereel among the People of Cyprus.

George Tsypin's impressive, icy Plexiglas slabs lost some of the sheer monumentality the sets carried in the vast Metropolitan Opera House but gained in intimacy and impact in their San Francisco surroundings.

How wrong we were to characterize Lubovitch's dances of the late 1970s as only brilliant feats of visualizing music: That is only part of this choreographer's genius. In "Othello" is the other side, a gift for informing every musical phrase with emotional meaning and conviction, every sudden change in rhythm or dynamic with surprise and inevitability.

The music was of a piece with the dance, which is no small achievement. The playing of the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra under Emil de Cou's baton was everything the composer could want. My admiration for Goldenthal's score only grows with every hearing. Surely this "Othello" is at least as precious a gift to American music as it is to American dance.

Goldenthal's score manages to celebrate tradition while subverting it with impeccable charm: There are echoes of Prokofiev and Britten, even of Glass. But through them resounds an unmistakably original and seductive new voice. In music, as in dance and drama, "Othello" is great news for American arts, San Francisco Ballet at its best.