

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

MONDAY, MAY 26, 1997

BALLET REVIEW

'Othello' Earns Its Place in History

Electrifying world premiere in New York

BY OCTAVIO ROCA

Chronicle Dance Critic

New York

The world of dance became richer at the Metropolitan Opera on Friday night. The gala occasion was the American Ballet Theatre's world premiere of Lar Lubovitch's "Othello," danced to an extraordinary new score by Elliot B. Goldenthal.

The ballet marks an unprecedented collaboration of ABT, San Francisco Ballet and the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, and it is the first fully commissioned new full-length ballet in ABT's history.

Best of all, "Othello" signals a major new chapter in American ballet as well as a spectacular addition to the international repertory.

This is not the first dance treatment of "Othello," but it is in many ways the most satisfying. A version at La Scala in 1818 did not hold the stage, and neither have more recent treatments by Serge Lifar, Vakhtang Chaboukiani and Jacques D'Amboise. The examples of Jose Limon's ritualistic approach in 1949's "The Moor's Pavane" — long an ABT staple — or the whimsy and irony of Brian McDonald's happy-ending version in "Prologue to a Tragedy" only point to the disarming simplicity of Lubovitch's ambitious "Othello."



Desmond Richardson danced the title role in ABT's 'Othello'

His is a language free of jargon, innocent of the slang of dance that many from Mark Morris to Twyla Tharp might have been tempted to employ in trying to make the story contemporary. Lubovitch leaves the tale alone, assuming that details are known to the audience and playing on that knowledge to dwell on profounder themes and vivid characters that are very much in Shakespeare's play.

The dance characterizations on opening night were vibrant and rang true, but it was the archetypal truths of their tale that the 'OTHELLO': Page E3 Col. 1

'OTHELLO': San Francisco Ballet Gets It Next Year

From Page E1

ABT dancers most clearly embodied. A constant ebb and flow of movement, most striking in the Act 2 seaside ensemble, suggested the cyclical, eternal nature of the violence at hand. That violence saturated the choreography: Even the partnering patterns in Act 1 created the illusion that the women were being lifted by the neck. By the time the brutal image grew into full realization in the tragic finale, the result emerged as almost cruelly natural.

Desmond Richardson's Othello remained an outsider, as much to the society around him as to the possibility of happiness itself. Given the most complex arm phrasing and athletic bravura turns, the muscular Richardson made the most of the unstoppable momentum in Lubovitch's choreography. Parrish Maynard's wiry, deadly serious Iago seemed not so much an evil man as the very embodiment of evil in the world. The shock of his jumping on Richardson's standing Othello to walk on his shoulders in nasty triumph was among Friday night's most indelible images. Cassio, even more utterly innocent in the ballet than in Shakespeare, was unforgettably dashing as danced by Keith Roberts. Best of all, Sandra Brown's beautiful Desdemona was not only a good woman but the tragically vulnerable personification of all that is good. Her virtue, at least as much

as Iago's evil, is what brings about the tragedy. That is the terrible cost of innocence in the world, our own as well as Shakespeare's. That is the truth of Lubovitch's new ballet.

There is a purity in much of the choreography that is very much of a piece with the heartbreaking inevitability of the tragedy told in movement. Desdemona captures the choreographer's imagination, and it is her personal tragedy that resonates longest after the curtain falls. The miracle here is how little of this resonance comes from details of pantomime, which the American choreographer avoids except for key moments.

Lubovitch's way with the tragedy is not to have the dancers act out dialogue but rather to drench their movements in the emotions of the plot. There are other ways of course. Still, there is much to be said for a story ballet that succeeds both in narrative clarity and striking new movement. "Othello" does just that. Not since William Forsythe's masterpiece "Orpheus," which still awaits an American production, has there been a new full-length ballet that is both this original and this gripping.

The style is recognizably Lubovitch's, though closer to his "The Red Shoes" or even "Into the Woods" than to the more abstract "Cavalcade" or "Brahms Symphony." With the exception of a positively Soviet-looking men's charac-

ter ensemble in the central act, Lubovitch's world is the very finest in American modern dance as translated by the dancers' bodies. The language is original and it works. It also helps to make "Othello" an immensely entertaining theatrical spectacle.

There is a dark and dangerous edge to Iago's gestures, and a subversive accent to the classical elements of his anguished duets with Othello. As in Lubovitch's extraordinary "American Gesture," the movement in "Othello" goes in and out of classical convention just as the bodies' relations to the music grow ever closer. Lubovitch is alert to the rhythmic possibilities within Goldenthal's monumental score, itself a great artistic leap from the young composer's work in "Interview With a Vampire" and the oratorio "Fire Water Paper." A minimalist whirlwind of arpeggios begins each act, with the musical storm giving way to melodic flights of breathtaking serenity. Echoes of Benjamin Britten and Philip Glass are worth pointing out only to note immediately that Goldenthal's "Othello" is very much on that level. Of a piece with Lubovitch's ballet, this score also marks a major chapter in American music.

Much of "Othello" works on two levels: The architecture of the intricate neoromantic music mirrored in the movement's brightest colors, only to be subverted by sud-

den dives into complex physical rhythms.

The costumes by Ann Hould-Ward, a longtime Lubovitch collaborator who designed "Into the Woods" as well as several ballets, are a contemporary spin on late medieval dress. They could have come from a lavish "Kiss me Kate" revival, but they work. The sets by George Tsypin are at once fluid and massive: huge sliding Plexiglas slabs enriched by rear and front projections by Wendall K. Harrington. Like the choreography, Tsypin's unsettling designs reflect the fragmented reality of Othello's world. Nothing is what it seems: Othello and Desdemona's wedding, for example, happens among realistic projections of St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, but the large cross the bishop carries in composed of neon lights.

The exuberance and sheer presentational elan of ABT's dancers, from principals to corps, guaranteed the premiere's success. The ballet also seems ripe for interpretations: It will be fascinating to see how San Francisco Ballet takes to it as the company presents the West Coast premiere of "Othello" at the War Memorial Opera House next season. This ballet deserves a long life, and doubtless it will have that. But it will be tough to surpass the electrifying thrill that kept the audience standing and cheering at the Met on Friday night.