

AUSTIN ARTS WATCH

Ballet



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Ballet Austin's 'Hamlet' is a dark, surreal wonder

Ballet, by its very nature, is dramatic. It's pure emotion given form through movement, light, and music. This makes "Hamlet", perhaps the most dramatic of Shakespeare's plays, a perfect choice for a ballet, as Stephen Mills has proven through his world-renowned production. Ballet Austin's "Hamlet" is a dark, sumptuous journey through Shakespeare's tale, bending and at times breaking the original narrative to create moments of intriguing texture and fiery emotion.

A certain knowledge of “Hamlet” is in many ways essential for true enjoyment of this ballet. The action is loose, symbolic, and esoteric, straying from the path of the original play in places, so a general grounding on the actual story is paramount to following the narrative. There’s still plenty of dark wonder on display here for those who aren’t “Hamlet” experts, but those with knowledge of the bard’s piece will have a much better appreciation for the performance.

Any performance of this play hinges upon the strength of the actor playing “Hamlet”. Indeed, many performances have been led astray due to the performance not having the right charisma or presence to take on the lead character. Luckily, dancer Frank Shott is more than up to the task, bringing a boldness and flair to the role, as well as some of the best technical skill in the piece. He has amazing chemistry with most of the other performers, in particular Ashley Lynn Sherman, with whom he creates a bevy of beautiful moments.

One performer who truly captures the surreal qualities of Stephen’s direction and choreography is Ashley Lynn Sherman, who takes the role of Ophelia to bold levels. The scene of her death is one of the most shocking, disturbing, and awe-inspiring moments of the ballet, and perhaps of the season. Mills and Sherman take those symbols that so signify Ophelia (water, flowers), and magnify them to stunning extremes, creating a darkly beautiful display that ends in the body of our lead actress hovering over the rest of the cast, cast in the beautiful flair of light, courtesy of the inspired lighting design of Tony Tucci. It’s the highlight of the piece, and the fact that it’s presented after a curtain fall makes it all the more surprising and powerful.

Ballet Austin continues to be one of the most adventurous and unique companies in town, thanks in no small part to the dark genius of Stephen Mills. Gorgeous and dreamlike, Ballet Austin’s “Hamlet” is a thrilling journey through Shakespeare’s story, given frenzied, fractured treatment that heightens the emotion, even as it shortens and intensifies the narrative. It’s one of the most original takes on Shakespeare’s play, and a stunning example of what Austin’s ballet community has to offer.

Photo Courtesy of Anne Marie Bloodgood

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Ballet Austin's 'Belle Redux' is a dark vision of the classic fairy tale

The story of Beauty and the Beast has been told in many ways, but never has it veered into such dark avenues as in Ballet Austin's production of Belle Redux. Wrenching out the most shadowy alcoves of the classic French tale, the Ballet, formulated in the mind of Stephen Mills, tells us a tale of a beast torn between good and evil, and the beautiful young woman who loves him despite it all. It takes many different turns than the original story, but what remains is a beauty and wonder that's beyond compare.

The world in which Belle Redux lives is a dark one, but it's admirable how everything that happens on stage is in service to that mood. From the sharp, striking movements of the dancers, to Michael Raiford's startling costumes, which shows heavy and intriguing use of leather and hoods, to the well-timed projection work. Underscoring it all is the eerie and industrial score by nationally-recognized composer Graham Reynolds, who channels his own Philip Glass to plunge the audience into dark soundscapes, which help to center us right in the heart of darkness.

Among the darkness of the play, there are few performances that bring a refreshing light. One of the most surprising is Frank Shott as Belle's father, whose beaming smile and uplifting demeanor help to bring a little bit of sunshine of most of the gray skies of the ballet. Our heroine, Belle, played by Michelle Thompson also brings her brightness, as from her lithe, smooth movement and easy air make every scene she's in shine. The costumes also help in this, as her colorful costumes stand in stark contrast to the black, grays, and browns that predominate the color scheme.

Belle Redux is a nightmarishly gorgeous piece, pulling from sources as varied as the original story, Jean Cocteau's French classic, and even a little of Disney's well-known animated film, to create some wildly unique. Forgoing the story's usual high romance for something more akin to dread, Ballet Austin's Belle Redux still weaves a potent spell, one a bit more sinister, though not any less seductive.

Photo Courtesy of Tony Spielberg

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