

# THE AUSTIN CHRONICLE

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## Review: Stephen Mills' *POE / A Tale of Madness Is Pitch Perfect*

Ballet Austin brings the master of the macabre to life (before killing him again)

REVIEWED BY CAT MCCARREY, MARCH 29, 2024, ARTS

Screeching violins underscore the tremulous strings of a mind gone wild, ominous percussion an insistent thrum felt deep in the throat. A darkened stage shot with columns of light, mazes of hospital beds with one crazed occupant. Figures rush between the rows of bed panels, silhouettes of masked shadows whispering... "Edgar."

So begins the terror-laden adrenaline rush of *Stephen Mills' POE / A Tale of Madness*. It moves at breakneck speed, each movement conveying a fevered version of Edgar Allan Poe's life, flashing before his eyes as he struggles in the clutches of his real-life mysterious death.

Some biographical facts: Edgar Allan Poe did actually die after being found delirious in a Baltimore gutter. Death shadowed his life, claiming his mother, her best friend and his adoptive mother, and his wife Sissy. For Ballet Austin, these truths are woven into his storyline, replete with his darker impulses, his tragic loves, and that omnipotent specter of death, crafting a harlequin horror of hope and despair.

Artistic director Stephen Mills says he's always gravitated toward darkness. In high school he was offered the choice between studying the works of William Faulkner and the works of Poe. It's tempting to imagine how his vision would play out when steeped in Southern Gothic tragedy, but he handles regular Gothic style more than well.

Because oh, how this production drips with Gothic splendor. Mills has assembled his supersquad of local talent, a top-tier list of past collaborators creating Poe's harrowing tale. Honestly, there's too much to praise in this production. Name an artistic aspect. Guarantee, it's been expertly handled in *Poe*. There's Shawn Sides' imaginative libretto, deftly integrating Poe's life with his ghoulish work, or composer and longtime Ballet Austin creative partner Graham Reynolds' cinematic score, leveled up for his first work conducted by Peter Bay with the Austin Symphony Orchestra.

Margaret Mitchell's lush costumes convey 1800s chic and pure Victorian dread, suit tails and robes flowing against wide ballgowns and wisped funeral shrouds. Set designer Michael B. Raiford's stagescapes are, to quote Stephen Mills, "clean, clear, simple, odd." Certain pieces, like the use of hospital beds, spectral feathers, and fairy tale coffins, linger in the mind far beyond the ballet's far-too-soon curtain fall. Tony Tucci and Erin Fleming's lighting

adds atmospheric terror to those sets through controlled shadows, fluorescent pendulums, and stark spotlights on dancers in spine-chilling formations.

And of course, there's the brilliant choreography. Collaboratively made with the dance corps in a shockingly quick two-week period, pieces are hypnotic in their off-kilter grace. The enormously talented company blends the best of contemporary and classical ballet, hurdling tonal shifts with ease.

Pointe work has never seemed so sinister. Characters often mirror each other jerkily, the repetition off just enough to be deeply unsettling. These mirrors are especially impressive when wrought between Poe and his doppelgänger the Imp of the Perverse, a leering version of Poe's worst self snapping at his heels (those roles were split cast – I saw Morgan Stillman as Poe and Colin Canavan as the Imp).

There's traditional beauty, often shown through the watchful Raven (Ian J. Bethany) and the stately character of Death (Edward Carr). A pas de deux of Death and Poe's mother (Grace Morton, swapping each night between mother and Sissy with Katherine Deutch) serves as a lovely respite after the furious whirligig of previous numbers. Carr's Death is horrifying, yet strangely comforting as he drags his victims off in a final embrace. And the Raven, a hulking and befeathered skeleton, performs impressive swooping solos with avian grace – that is, when he's not perched in disquieting repose near Poe.

Poe himself seemed to hold back until the second act, giving space to numbers where the company highlights their eerie chops. In a segment showing Poe's creative furor, Sissy (Deutch) prowls over and beneath his writing desk like a caged cat. Poe's imagined characters from the House of Usher infringe on the stage as he writes, luring him to dance as lines between life and art blur. But Stillman's Poe shines in a late number where he struggles against a parachuted black cloth controlled by the representations of his struggles. He performs gymnastic feats of contortion, shrouded but tumbling through it like water. It's environment and movement in perfect harmony.

This is a ballet I immediately wanted to watch again, and again, and again. It's a testament to Austin's continued artistic privilege. We get to claim this collection of collaborators as our own. They've created a work that deserves more than three nights of performances. It's not shopped out yet – “the paint isn't even dry on it,” says Mills – but hopefully others will soon get the pure pleasure of experiencing the madness of Stephen Mills and company.

## **Stephen Mills' POE / A Tale of Madness**

**The Long Center**

**Saturday, March 23**

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