

ARTS REVIEWS**Pop Girly Meets Gothic Glam**

Ballet Austin's newest original was comfortable with contrasts



by **Cat McCarrey**

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CREDIT: ANNE MARIE BLOODGOOD

A few guarantees for when **Ballet Austin's** Artistic Director Stephen Mills drops a new show: First, it will be a twisty retelling of a classic – classic fairy tale, classic author, classic historical figure. Second, he'll add a delectable dash of darkness. And finally, the production will have a stellar combination of music and set and costume,

combining to craft a truly singular ballet experience. It's uniquely Mills, and for the last 25 years, it's been uniquely Austin's.

This latest work, *Marie Antoinette: Vampire Queen of Versailles*, rocked it on all counts. It began with a prim and proper Marie's arrival in the French court (played by Dianetsy Rojas on my Saturday viewing, and by Grace Morton Friday/Sunday). She dealt with an uninterested husband in King Louis XVI (Grayson Gallella), a flirtation with military member Axel (Sat., Jack Morris; Fri./Sun., Colin Heino), and ultimate temptation by the vampire De Maret (Sat., Colin Canavan; Fri./Sun., Morgan Stillman). Yep. That's right. A vampire. Because this was a total genre mash-up. There were elements of Sofia Coppola's 2006 film *Marie Antoinette* mixed with visuals from *Blade* or *The Matrix*. Opposites don't necessarily attract, but oddly complement each other.

Such culture clashes happened everywhere. Set designer Michael B. Raiford played with bright pop sensibilities and halls drenched in electric pink. The center focal point of a neon double arch served as entrance and attention grabber. It literally highlighted Marie's isolation in a society that eats, drinks, and is merry, not knowing they soon will die. Margaret Mitchell's costumes dripped with frilly femininity in the French court, all flounced skirts and glitter. It was a bright spectacle that turned gloriously gothic in the second act, marks of Versailles disappearing as De Maret's promise of immortality got closer. That's when Mitchell brought in gray-toned creatures of the night, dancing in lighting designer Erin Earle Fleming's lines of glowing color against a foreboding black background.



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Rounding out the dream team of collaborators was live orchestration composed by Graham Reynolds. There were hallmark earth-shattering droning tones and heavy bass, but Reynolds also sprinkled in nods to the Baroque era.

Harpichord trills kicked off ballroom scenes. Soft moments veered closer to traditional classical song structures, but always edged toward modernity. You never knew when a screeching violin or an industrial drumbeat would explode in the ear.

As for the choreography? Well, Mills has mastered the balance between ballet that's deeply emotional yet deeply architectural. His work values vulnerability, not only expecting dancers to display physical strength but also requiring a full-body acting performance to convey ambition or disappointment in positions that can be read from the rafters. Still, he thrives in experimentation. Dancers created contemporary shapes, distinct poses, and geometric forms that rang with beautiful discordance. It's vignette-based choreography. Bursts of motion culminating in frozen, statuesque moments that belong in a museum.



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And even while Mills' dancers wholly embodied modern art, arms precisely akimbo with angularity galore, they captured crystal-clear emotional beats. The viewers didn't have to guess at King Louis XVI's foolish vanity. It was telegraphed from his first foray onstage, where he struck poses and air guitared for an adoring audience. Marie herself wasn't a cipher either. Her unhappiness with this peacocking princeling was obvious in her miserable stares toward the sidelines, a desperate yearning for something else. Wild emotions were captured in ensemble pieces using wheeled chairs for mayhem or hypnotically tossed scarves for descents into madness. And in duets, particularly an extended *pas de deux* between De Maret and a heroic Axel, the battles between desire and righteousness were clearly written as they traversed the stage.

So yes, like other Mills joints, *Marie Antoinette* was drenched in visual and auditory wonder. But, also like other Mills work, it went beyond the immediate splendor of the production. His ballets ring with simple messages. For *Marie*, it brought up questions of power, of a person's worth in transactional society, in exerting control over one's own life. The vampiric addition? Just a method to perfectly pinpoint universal truths.



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Marie Antoinette: Vampire Queen of Versailles

The Long Center

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