

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Alexander Iziliaev

Everything is Beautiful at the Ballet

By Kristen Gillette

“Ballet is more than layers of tulle and satin shoes. It’s ripples of muscle, explosive athleticism and inexplicably moving stories,” writes Stephanie Murray in her Washington Post article [Ballet 101: Dispelling myths for newcomers and skeptics](#).

Pennsylvania Ballet’s recent performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has me thinking the same thing.

I was not familiar with the plot of *Midsummer Night’s Dream* ahead of time, but there are a good two paragraphs of description located in the program to help the viewer figure out what’s going on in the show. Instead of reading pre-performance however, I opted to jump right in to see how well the Pennsylvania Ballet could communicate Shakespeare’s original comedy through Balanchine’s choreography.

Principal dancers Julie Diana and Jermel Johnson (as Titania and Oberon) bring the first bit of comedy to the performance as they pantomime a fight over who gets control of a young attendant. Diana pouts as she waves Johnson away—but he just keeps picking up the young boy and carrying him over to hold his own cape up. Then Diana steals him back, dragging him by the arm to her side of the stage. Eventually she wins the argument.

Although Diana and Johnson already have me laughing, Alexander Peters, as Puck, wins me over with his comedic talent. He sneaks around the stage casting love spells, gesturing an “Oops! Did I do that?” to the audience with a sarcastic tone. To me his facial expressions are almost more communicative than Shakespeare’s words, and for that he garners the biggest applause.

However, at some points in the ballet I get lost. When Puck makes the mistake of bringing together the wrong two pairs of lovers, I find it difficult to track characters due to the similar costuming (originally used by the Pacific Northwest Ballet). While I potentially miss some key moments, the plot is simple enough for me to catch back up with what’s going on. In the end, the show’s strengths make up for its downfalls.

Puck turns Bottom into an ass, and I return to enjoyment. Oberon casts a spell on Titania and she falls in love with the ass. Titania and Bottom's pas de deux was the highlight of my evening. Daniel Cooper manages to turn beautiful ballet movements into those of a staggering donkey. As Titania sways across the stage, the donkey clomps across it. He crawls on all fours. Titania brings him some plants to eat. She guides him away for more dancing, but he's distracted, turning back to eat the plants. His movements are a perfect mixture of awkwardness and grace.

While the comedic elements are what make the show really enjoyable, the ballet has some gasp-worthy moments. The true technical star of the evening is Gabriella Yudenich as Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. My jaw drops during a series of fouettés and her perfect grande jeté leaps would make many ballerinas jealous. Johnson also displays sheer strength, performing triple changements--a jump in which the legs switch position three times--as if they were nothing.

Although the last pas de deux of the "ideal untroubled love" is simple and straightforward-- and at times boring--it ends beautifully, with Zachary Hench holding a back-arching Lauren Fadeley with one arm, lifting the other to the sky. I'm really impressed by how they both communicate grace in a movement that requires such power.

Midsummer demonstrates that ballet is clearly so much more than layers of fluffy tulle and satin shoes.

A Midsummer Night's Dream, Pennsylvania Ballet, March 7-17th

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