



# OREGON ARTSWATCH

## OREGON'S ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

### DANCE

## A Danish pastry, via Napoli

Preview: Oregon Ballet Theatre premieres a lavish version of a 19th century Danish story ballet set in Italy, with a heroine made for today.

OCTOBER 5, 2018 // DANCE // MARTHA ULLMAN WEST

Teresina, the heroine of *Napoli*, is a woman for our time. Don't believe me? Go see [Oregon Ballet Theatre's](#) sparkling new production of August Bournonville's signature ballet, which opens the company's 29th season at the Keller Auditorium on Saturday night. With a libretto by Bournonville, and a score by E. Helsted, Gade and Paulli, with whom the choreographer collaborated in the same way as Petipa with Tchaikovsky, and Balanchine with Stravinsky, this is a 19th century story ballet with which 21st century audiences can relate -- and particularly with fiery, independent Teresina.

In all three acts of the great Danish choreographer's lighthearted ballet about common Neapolitan people (there isn't an aristocrat in sight) she is a take-charge kind of gal, in control of her life and her future: "I'll decide whom I'll marry," she declares without words in Act I, choosing Gennaro, the fisherman, over Giacomo the macaroni seller and Peppo the lemonade seller. Her widowed mother would prefer greater economic stability for her daughter, and incidentally for herself. But Teresina prevails and despite a looming storm, she and Gennaro go off for an evening boat ride and some alone time. He, the hapless hero—a convention of 19th century story ballets -- manages to lose her in the stormy seas, and returns to land without her.



*Makino Hildestad in OBT's 2015 production of the third act of "Napoli." The company premieres its full-length production of the 1842 Bournonville story ballet on Saturday. Photo: James McGrew.*

"Give me that medal, I'll do this myself," she asserts, equally wordlessly, in Act II when her fiancé finds her in Capri's famed Blue Grotto, and fails to act quickly enough to save her from the unwanted attentions of Golfo, a sea demon who dwells there, happily turning maidens into Naiads whenever he gets the chance. And thrusting the medal depicting Mary, Mother of God (another strong woman) straight at her would-be seducer, she stops him cold.

In Act III, back on land and accused of witchcraft -- for how could she possibly have survived that storm at sea without it? -- she blows off the accusers, who just happen to be the rejected suitors Giacomo and Peppo, and she and Gennaro receive the blessing of kindly Friar Ambrosio. After much celebratory dancing by hordes of Neapolitan men, women, and children, including the happy couple (who of course dance the concluding Tarantella better than anyone else), off she goes in a cart with Gennaro, and her mother(!) for a life of wedded bliss.

OBT's dancers performed that third act three years ago in the second half of the company's fall opener, and did it with such heartfelt commitment to the buoyancy, speed and attention to detail that are the hallmarks of Bournonville technique that I left the theater thinking how marvelous it would be to see them perform all three acts. I had seen the full ballet in Copenhagen a decade earlier, and it is that version of *Napoli* that OBT will premiere on Saturday night.

Evidently Kevin Irving, OBT's artistic director, thought it would be marvelous to see the full ballet, too, as did Frank Andersen and Eva Kloborg, who had staged it. And so it came to pass that a considerable amount of money (the company declines to say how much) was raised to build the sets and costumes, which were meticulously and elegantly designed by Danish Mari I Dali, here in Portland. For the past several weeks, she has been working here with OBT's costume shop and set builders to create the company's first evening-length story ballet production since 1994, when James Canfield's and designer Campbell Baird's gorgeous *Nutcracker* premiered.

What I missed from the 2015 Act III performance was the many different characters who populated the stage of Copenhagen's Royal Danish Theater when I saw the Royal Danish Ballet perform it there in June of 2005, on the second night of a ten-day Bournonville Festival, a birthday bash put on by Andersen, at the time the RDB's artistic director, to celebrate the bicentennial of the Petipa of Denmark.

Last month I watched an early rehearsal of that problematic second act, conducted by Andersen, Kloborg and Bjorn, all of whom are trained since childhood in the Bournonville tradition and now travel the world staging his ballets. The act opens with an unconscious Teresina, saved from drowning by two naiads, lying recumbent across their laps, holding the guitar she had been playing for Gennaro in Act I. Rehearsal started with the second cast, Kelsie Nobriga as Teresina, Matthew Pawlicki-Sinclair (new to the company this year) as Gennaro, and Colby Parsons as Golfo, described in some libretti as a sea sprite, but by my esteemed colleague and Bournonville expert Tobi Tobias as a sea monster. That's the way Parsons' brother, Chauncey, the first-cast Golfo, interprets the role; both are convincingly arrogant and entitled.



Second Act

That rehearsal was slow-paced. Kloborg, Andersen and Dinna Bjorn (who choreographed this act in 2005 "after Bournonville," who was reportedly never satisfied with it) stopped the music -- the ever-important music, whose tempos must be exactly right if they're to be matched correctly with the all important mime, as well as the dancing -- to adjust a port de bras here, the placement of the naiads on stage there, and in Andersen's case, to give a magnificent demonstration of how to run soundlessly on point.

I wasn't bored for a split second, and that's not always the case when I watch rehearsals. And I don't remember ever, in several decades of watching them, being moved to tears. But Xuan Cheng, first-cast Teresina, achieved that, as she regained consciousness, looked around her, rose to her point-shoe-clad feet and ran frantically around the unfamiliar undersea space, with no idea where she was, or memory of how she got there. Even in this early rehearsal, she had the ability to make me suspend my disbelief, not only with the use of her body, but also with the use of her face.

In an interview a few days later, I asked her if she thought she would have problems projecting that terror in the Keller, scarcely an intimate theater, and she laughed. In China, where she received her first training, she told me, and on tour with the Canadian companies -- La La Human Steps and Les Grands Ballet Canadiens, where she danced with before coming to Portland seven years ago -- she performed in many theaters larger than the Keller. No problem, she said, and was echoed by Peter Franc, first-cast Gennaro, who spent many years with Houston Ballet, where he received most of his training, and where the theater in which it performs holds twice the number of people as the Keller. About the demands of his role as Gennaro, he said, "[He] is passionate, bold, romantic, sincere, religious and physically reactive, which I am not. I'm learning to use my face with Frank [Andersen]'s help and it's fascinating to see Eva and Frank teaching the mime, using their eyes."

After rehearsal, Andersen spoke of the "heart" that OBT's dancers have, as well as their friendliness and generosity, "the most of any we have worked with," a high compliment from someone who has staged Bournonville in 40 or 50 countries, including China and Uruguay. And he applauded their willingness to commit themselves to "being" the characters they are performing, to knowing the music so well they can "hum it when they wake up in the middle of the night." He also pointed out that the music itself is cinematic, driving the choreography, telling the story.



Visiting stager Dinna Bjorn, working with OBT dancers during rehearsals for "Napoli." Photo: Yi Yin

"[Bournonville's] ballets don't import very well," wrote critic Marcia B. Siegel in an essay for the *Hudson Review* pinned to the 2005 Bournonville Festival, where like me and Rita Felciano, who is coming up from San Francisco to see *Napoli* here, was part of the international press corps. "They're 'old-fashioned' in a particular, homey way, like the genre paintings of the period. Even the dancing is domesticated; you don't scream over it, you savor it. Bournonville dancing is defined by a sense of momentum, lightness, and protean detail. Not many dancers can manage this, even very good ones, unless they really live in the Bournonville realm."

OBT's dancers, in fact, have been "living in the Bournonville realm" off and on for the past three years, intensely for the past five weeks, and it's a realm whose challenges they appear to embrace. "Bournonville's my jam," Chauncey Parsons said to me after that early rehearsal, and everyone else in the studio, working as hard as they were, seemed to be having a blast. I think we will, too.

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Oregon Ballet Theatre's *Napoli* has five performances at Portland's Keller Auditorium beginning Saturday, October 6, and continuing through October 13. [Casting, schedule, and ticket information here.](#)



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## One Response. **Have your say.**

1. Martha Ullman West says:

*October 8, 2018 at 1:44 pm*

I knew of course, from watching rehearsals and Act III of *Napoli* three years ago that OBT's dancers would perform Bournonville's difficult technique with buoyancy and skill. And I knew, too, from viewing the designs for this Danish designed but home grown production that the sets and costumes for all three acts would be very pretty, true to period, and work with the choreography to tell the story of fiery Teresina and her short-tempered fisherman lover Gennaro.

What I didn't know until I saw the opening night performance on Saturday night was that the principals, the soloists, the corps and the smallest children would dance—and act—with the authority and stage presence of dancers who had been living and breathing Bournonville for as long as the cadre of Danes who staged the ballet.

Andersen, Kloborg and Bjorn acknowledged this at the curtain call, gently shoving dancers in front of themselves, applauding them along with the cheering audience, visibly relishing not so much their own achievement but that of the dancers.

So I'm going to single out some performances here: Xuan Cheng went beyond my expectations as Teresina, and those expectations were high. In that fairy tale second act, she was both betwitched and bewitching, tender and terrified, and in all three acts Teresina with every fiber of her dancing being. Also in Act II, Chauncey Parsons's authority as Golfo—he stalked onto that stage with an angular fluidity, no mean trick when you're supposed to be moving under water, commanding not only the naiads but the entire auditorium. I would add that I found that second act to be the most beautiful of the three regarding the set and the costumes, and the most holistic if you will, everything coming together in this watery kingdom, including Michael

Mazzola's gorgeous lighting.

Peter Franc danced with the Houston Ballet for eight years and then left that company to dance with the contemporary company Aspen/Santa Fe Ballet, and then joined OBT in 2015, because he missed classical ballet. All of that background showed in his performance of Gennaro, sinking to the ground in modern dance despair when he thought Teresina was lost forever, his beats (aka batterie) in the first and third acts impeccably timed and precise.

And I would like to extend a rose or two or three to Eva Burton, who danced in the opening joyful Balabile, as a Naiad in Act II and in Act III's Pas de Six and Tarantella with enormous presence and sparkle and yes authority, as did Makino Hayashi and Katherine Monogue. Among the men, new soloist Matthew Pawlicki-Sinclair (who danced Gennaro at Sunday's matinee and will do so again on Thursday night) is clearly an asset to the company, and Thomas Baker's performance throughout was such that I wonder anew when he's going to be promoted from company artist to soloist. Three roses at least go to Lisa Kipp as Veronica, Teresina's not exactly resigned mother, and to Michael Linsmeier and Adam Hartley as Teresina's rich, dumb suitors. I'm going back closing night, wish I could go Thursday as well when Kelsie Nobriga, Pawlicki-Sinclair and Colby Parsons assume the principal roles—it was reported to me by a visiting out of town critic that they were excellent at the matinee on Sunday.

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