In 2015 Oregon Ballet Theatre staged the third act of August Bournonville’s 1842 “Napoli.” It’s the best-known part of this enchanting ballet, often accepted in mixed programs; the variations have become staples in competitions and gala events. It turns out that the Oregonians used this last act as a dress rehearsal for the entire “Napoli.” That meant massaging sets and costumes along the lines of the original ones. At this time, OBT is the only American company with its own “Napoli” production. (Arizona Ballet’s 2018 version borrowed theirs from the Royal Danish Ballet). OBT currently employs twenty-nine dancers, a junior company of fourteen and six apprentices. So Artists’ Director Kevin Irving took a substantial risk, both artistic and financial, to do the entire “Napoli.” It was more than paid off.

Coached by Frank Anderson, Diane Bjorn (who choreographed the second act) and Eva Kloborg -- all of them Royal Danish Ballet alumni -- OBT’s combined dancers, which also included impressively coached children from the school, did a fine job in a fully developed, musically intact, and finely detailed recreation of a great work. The dancers had to draw on abilities few of them thought they had. Best of all, since the company now owns this “Napoli” they can grow into.

For the rest of us, we finally learned what those exuberant third act festivities were all about. Story ballets, whether as tragically “Swan Lake,” “Roméo and Juliet” and “Ongine” — or with a happy ending — “Sleeping Beauty,” “Ondine” and “Don Quixote” are fairy tales. That’s why we love them. On many levels “Napoli” is a fairy tale as well, even though it supposedly happens in a real city. Bournonville gives us an idealized picture of Neapolitan life, one in which good wins over evil. Northern Europeans still love what we see on our summer vacation on top of Italy’s boot. I remember walking the streets of Naples and hearing people singing through open windows and pushing their vegetable carts. Bournonville may have enjoyed similar experiences, particularly since he was there in exile, having been sentenced to address long Christian VII from the stage.

In this Bournonville farce, if that’s what it is, the lovers go through trials until they live happily ever after, even when their calamities on the edge of the Mediterranean. Making it even better is Bournonville’s having developed his story in terms of detailed characters for which we immediately suspend our disbelief. Using both dance steps and mime, which includes physical acting in addition to general language, he packed the stage with people that worried, cheated, joked, quarreled, prayed, fought and lived. The first act’s building crowd is so likely that a couple of times I found myself distracted from the main story. Almost off stage, for instance, a couple’s private “conversation” demanded attention. What were they talking about? They made me miss the lovers’ departure.

The prinâna bâalaâna with the woman’s rond de jambe and the man’s five entreats highlight the first act. With some help from fissipes and Cherub Butler trumpet, Jeffrey Stalin’s Pescarolo just about deals a deathblow to grand opera, and I am pretty sure it was fissipes again who called up the storm that shipwrecked and almost drowned our lovers. “Napoli” was beautifully cast. Every minute on stage Teresina (Xuan Cheng) called up the storm that shipwrecked and almost drowned our lovers. The second act, also, excellently shows the communicative power of mime when done with large, clearly reading gestures. It’s on an act that has already disappeared though some of it can still be seen in silent movies. A terrified wide-eyed Teresina emerges from a place to place, grabbing her chest and also succeeding in telling her story from the world outside. Ambidextrously, the nanais with eyes that closed dead stretch out welcoming hands yet hold Teresina at bay when she asks for help. Despite her fear, Teresina seems to be fascinated by Goffo. Goffo appears just in time. Their dance recognition becomes “Napoli”’s high point, a triumph for Cheng and Franco. The exquisite hand-in-hand gestures in a spirit of recognition, the turning of the ring opened eyes, but frighteningly. It was Goffo’s tearful heart that convinced her. “O Santissima,” she started that popular Neapolitan hymn to the Virgin, accompanied the offered medal. Even for non-believers it must be satisfying to see that Teresina is so triumphantly transformed towards Goffo, medal in hand, had her maed like the Wicked Witch in “The Wizard of Oz.”
most cohesively excellent performances. It showed that OBT has lived with the intricacies of Bournonville’s art. In this act, at a moment when we are all prepared for the wedding festivities, Giacomo and Peppo’s slandering and suggestions of witchcraft, and the speed with which it was disseminated, was chilling. But feisty Teresina saved the day by dragging the priest back to the stage, and Gennaro got to kick the villains out of town. The iconic bridge, however, needs a more varied crowd looking down on the celebrations.

The Pas de Six and its many solo variations, showed buoyant dancers, sometimes barely touching the floor; feet turns and stitching footwork that dazzled they eye even as you could not catch all the details. Amazingly, the dancers never showed how fiendishly difficult these fortunately short variations are. When Gennaro joined Teresina in the spirited Tarantella, theirs had a charmingly flirtatious catch-me-if-you-can quality to it. But I am not sure whether the whole community participation in the finale was not a gilding of the lily.

Still, October 6, 2018 was a banner day for Oregon Ballet Theatre.