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Oregon Ballet Theatre's "Napoli": Royally Served

October 10, 2018

Oregon Ballet Theatre
Keller Auditorium
Portland, OR

October 6, 2018 (Opening Night)
Napoli

Dean Speer

I initially had no direct connection to Bournonville's work in my own ballet training until I began studying with Flemming Halby, at Seattle's First Chamber Dance Company in the 1970s, then followed him to his Dance Lab School (when First Chamber Dance Company shut down, three of the dancers began their own school — Halby, the inimitable Sara de Luis, and Raymond Bussey) and then to Pacific Northwest Ballet's School, where he was on the faculty until his retirement. Halby first caught my eye as a young dancer when, watching him in a studio rehearsal, he executed a perfect sequence of a *sauté a la seconde* that immediately went into a *grand jeté en tournant* (aka, a *tour jeté*); I recall how he always wore a blue, knit unitard, and how hard all the dancers worked — and sweated. Flemming was Danish trained and liked to recount how he began as a child — one of the many on the bridge scene in Act III of *Napoli*, and how he grew through the ranks to become a principal of the Royal Danish Ballet. We'd beg him to give us some Bournonville steps and sequences and sometimes we'd be lucky enough that he'd acquiesce and give us something really fun and challenging. I was also so impressed and pleased when PNB's directors at the time, Kent Stowell and Francia Russell, asked him to stage PNB's first complete act from the historic and iconic Bournonville canon — in this case *Flower Festival at Genzano*. As I recall, it was wonderfully done. (The pas de deux from this ballet is often seen, but rarely do we get to see the whole thing.)

You can imagine how thrilled all of us were when Oregon Ballet Theatre announced last year that not only would they be bringing back their rendition of their Act III of *Napoli*, which they first did in 2015, but that they would be producing the ballet in its entirety. Wow. I believe OBT is first ballet company in North America to stage the full-length version of this ballet. OBT built its production, locally, from scratch including sets, costumes, and importantly bringing Danish ballet royalty to stage and coach the cast: Frank Andersen (former Artistic Director of the Royal Danish Ballet); Dinna Bjørn (former Royal Danish Ballet dancer and former Artistic Director of the both the Norwegian and Swedish National Ballets); Eva Kloberg (former ballet mistress and teacher at The Royal Ballet School, as well as The Royal Danish Ballet in the Bournonville repertoire); rounding this out costume and scenery designer Marie í Dali, a frequent contributor to things Danish — opera, theatre, and the ballet.



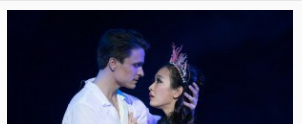
Peter Franc, Xuan Cheng, and Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers in August Bournonville's "Napoli"
Photo by Jingzi Zhao

Opening Night was one for the books — truly a milestone in the artistic and business growth of OBT and how enriching to have this important ballet now available to NW audiences. The entire Company, augmented by OBT II, OBT School students, plus supernumeraries were on their A game, for sure. Revisiting Act III, I found it even tighter and fuller and before, replete with details, small and large, and a rousing, rousing Tarantella that made us all want to rush out, buy our own tambourines and move to a village where everyone dances after dinner. How wonderful is that?



Kelsie Nobriga, Matthew Pawlicki-Sinclair, and Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers in August Bournonville's "Napoli"
Photo by Jingzi Zhao

The amazing cast included Xuan Cheng as the



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spunky
heroine
Teresina,
Peter Franc
as her
faithful



Oregon Ballet Theater dancers
Xuan Cheng and Peter Franc
in August Bournonville's "Napoli"
Photo by James McGrew.

boyfriend/fiancee, ballet mistress Lisa Kipp doing a turn (literally and with great fun and panache) as Teresina's mother, Veronica, ballet master Jeffrey Stanton doing double duty as both Fra Ambrosio (a friar) and as a troubador singer, Pascariello, and comedically competing for Teresina's hand, Adam Hartley as Giacomo, and as Peppo, Michael Linsmeier.

In Act II, principal Chauncey Parsons got to exercise not only his dancing but also his acting chops as the sea monster, Golfo, who transforms Teresina into a Naiad (water spirit), with a group of water nymphs led by Ansa Capizzi and Makino Hayashi.

As much as I loved and adored Act I and II, I was living for Act III, especially its lively dancing—the pas de six and its accompanying Tarantella. So much precision, pep, small and large jumps (often combined), and sweet delivery made for a rousing finale. Kudos to Eva Burton, Kimberly Fromm, Hayashi, Katherine Monogue, Emily Parker, and the cadre of men—Thomas Baker, Colby Parsons, Matthew Pawlicki-Sinclair, and the featured Brian Simcoe. (This was largely the same cast who did the Balabile dance in Act I, and supplemented by Jessica Lind, Kelsie Nobriga, Christopher Kaiser, and Theodore Watler).



Jeff Stanton
and Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers
in August Bournonville's "Napoli"
Photo by Jingzi Zhao

Some of the Bournonville characteristics I enjoyed were turns from second position (rarely done), tight pirouettes into a fifth position that were long held, arms en bas (low fifth), and the quick use of feet with rapid small steps.

And if you were looking for the traditional pas de deux and attendant variations, they were embedded in the swirl of the grand Tarantella. Cheng and Franc greatly excelled in their assignments, each with the joy and style that comes with this choreographer's work. They displayed sustained balances, turns and beats galore.



Xuan Cheng
and Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers
in August Bournonville's "Napoli"
Photo by Jingzi Zhao

(I love the true story of how Bournonville was banished from Denmark for unauthorized speaking to the king from the stage, and



Oregon Ballet Theater dancers
Chauncey Parsons and Xuan Cheng
in August Bournonville's "Napoli"
Photo by Jingzi Zhao.

how he turned this to his artistic advantage by soaking up other cultural expressions in foreign lands and then later incorporating these into his ballets upon his Prodigal return.)

Music Director Niel DePonte led the 53 piece mighty OBT Orchestra through the historic score composed by Edvard Helsted, Holger Simon Paulli, Niels W. Gade, Francois Henri Prume, and Hans Christian Lumbye.

OBT's production of this classical ballet was more than first-rate, and I know I want to see it again and again. In my view, it could be brought back each year as perhaps a seasonal offering.

Let's get our tambourines and celebrate!

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