

Atlanta Ballet's "Hamlet" tells Shakespeare's story without words

LIVING By Cynthia Bond Perry - For the AJC



0

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Thursday, April 10, 2014

Sparks flew as steel blades clashed during a recent Atlanta Ballet rehearsal. Dancers Christian Clark and Benjamin Stone struck their swords high and low, advancing and retreating, with every lunge, parry and swipe timed to the music's urgent pulse.

It was a duel to the death for their characters, Hamlet and Laertes, in the final scene of Stephen Mills' "Hamlet," a contemporary ballet adaptation of Shakespeare's play. The end of this duel is also where the ballet begins; as Hamlet takes his last dying breaths, the story of murder, deceit and revenge replays in his mind.

Mills' "Hamlet," in its second Atlanta Ballet production after its 2003 Atlanta premiere, runs April 11-13 at the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre.

Mills created "Hamlet" in 2000 during his first year as artistic director of Ballet Austin. Since then, the production has become a signature work and has helped bring national visibility to the company.

He explained that he'd had an affinity for the play since he studied it in high school. But it was no small challenge to tell Shakespeare's tale without words. But through strong visuals, music, and an unusual choreographic device, Mills found ways to speak through dance in ways that words cannot.

It's a big story with many layers he said. "But in dance, you can really only tell one story at a time." So Mills distilled the plot to its essence: a young man avenges his father's murder.

"Deception and murder — these themes have not gone out," Mills said. "Being able to relive them in a theatrical way helps us think about how they're related to us today."

To give the story modern-day relevance, Mills uses a contemporary setting. A dark stage with huge Plexiglas columns references Shakespeare's dark Danish castle. Some of the asides — moments when a character speaks directly to the audience — occur inside these columns. The transparent tubes heighten the effect when the Ghost of Hamlet's Father appears.

Philip Glass' tense, driving music complements the pulls and rhythms of Mills' choreography. Guest conductor Beatrice Jona Affron, who deftly handled the Ballet's "Carmina Burana" last spring, will lead the Atlanta Ballet Orchestra's live performances.

With his choreography, Mills used certain devices to say a lot in a short amount of time. One of these is the three Ghost Hamlets, who appear early on and follow Hamlet through most of the ballet. They appear shortly after Hamlet returns home, expecting his father's funeral. On seeing his uncle's and mother's wedding, Hamlet becomes confused, Mills said, and his personality begins to split.

Three men dressed like Hamlet appear on stage. Each one reveals a different facet of his personality, through his relationships with Ophelia, his father and his mother.

In rehearsal, dancers John Welker and Tara Lee practiced one of these charged duets, when Hamlet rejects Ophelia's love. He gripped her wrist, thrust her outward and yanked her back in. She pulled away, crumpled around his shoulder, sunk down, then rose into an arabesque filled with sorrow.

Welker later talked about his character. Hamlet's defining moment occurs in a solo based on the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, when he confronts his inner demons. "He wrestles with the revenge he feels in his heart" and frustration that his life isn't turning out as he had planned, said Welker. After killing Ophelia's and Laertes' father Polonius, Hamlet realizes "he's becoming the very person he did not want to be."

Mills' use of the three Ghost Hamlets shouldn't confuse audiences, but it does ask them to tap their imaginations. "Dance is really about metaphor. As poetry is," Mills said. "By having these three characters, it allows time to stretch out and gives people the space to think about it," Mills said. "It allows a little bit more poetry."

DANCE PREVIEW

Atlanta Ballet presents Stephen Mills' "Hamlet."

Live with the Atlanta Ballet Orchestra

8 p.m. Apr. 11 & 12; 2 p.m. April 12 & 13. \$21.70-\$116.04. Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre. 2800 Cobb Galleria Parkway, Atlanta. 1-800-982-2787, www.atlantaballet.com.



Reader Comments 0

Next Up in Living



Matt Lauer scandal: Ex-wife speaks out



Classmates help Morehouse medical student distinguish colors for the first time



The good with the bad



World AIDS Day 2017: 9 facts about HIV/AIDS everyone should know

Marvel star Chris Pratt warns of dangerous imposter

More Stories

Popular in Entertainment

- 1 Robert J. Farley, Atlanta theater legend, dead at 69

 - 2 A guide to food and drink at Atlanta Falcons' new stadium

 - 3 Atlanta Christmas concerts 2017: Brian Setzer, Trans-Siberian Orchestra...
-
-

NEWS ▶

CUSTOMER SERVICE ▶

MARKETPLACE ▶

SOCIAL MEDIA ▶

© 2017 Cox Media Group. By using this website, you accept the terms of our [Visitor Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy](#), and understand your options regarding [Ad Choices](#) ▶. [Learn about careers at Cox Media Group](#)

