

Entertainment & Arts

LONG BEACH BALLET TELLS STORY IN ITS 'DREAM'

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With its cast of mismatched young lovers, feuding supernatural monarchs and inept amateur tragedians, Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" has long attracted important ballet choreographers.

But David Wilcox, founder and artistic director of the 4 1/2-year-old Long Beach Ballet, isn't intimidated by the historical record. "We should be the first choreographers allowed to call a ballet 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,'" he proclaims. "We're the only ones following the story correctly."

Wilcox believes that when major choreographers of the 19th and 20th centuries--including Marius Petipa, Mikhail Fokine, George Balanchine and Frederick Ashton--retold the Shakespeare play in dance, the results were inevitably flawed if only because of their choice of accompaniment.

"The use of music composed by Mendelssohn," Wilcox explains, "prevented the entire Shakespeare story from being told with all its emotional values intact. The Mendelssohn (incidental music to Shakespeare's play) just doesn't lend itself to big dance."

Consequently when the Long Beach Ballet's \$150,000 "Dream" opens at the Terrace Theater on Friday, the music will be by Sergei Prokofiev--in Wilcox's words, "a 20th-Century composer who could help us to keep close to the Shakespeare story. We found different themes to go along with the action, to allow for many new and thrilling possibilities."

Choosing Prokofiev's "Classical," Seventh and Fifth symphonies represents just the beginning of what Wilcox considers "a firm break from the traditional, (leading to) a version of the play (in dance) that I think audiences will probably love the most because we're going to really tell the story."

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Wilcox himself is dancing the role of Oberon in the production, a risky prospect considering that, at 35, he hasn't danced much in eight years--and considering how some

balletomanes might compare him to Balanchine's Edward Villella (at 26) or Ashton's Anthony Dowell (at 21) as the same character.

Christopher Tabor--Long Beach Ballet associate director and choreographer of this version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"--dismisses the subject by suggesting that everyone is "far too star conscious." Wilcox, he says, "is a good dancer and as Oberon projects an imperiousness and strength of presence" in the role.

Like Wilcox, Tabor is convinced that attention to literal narrative line "is our way of having a fighting chance to really grab the attention of the audience and keep it."

"The (previous) creators of story ballets, in particular 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' assumed the public knew the stories so they didn't bother to tell the plot anymore," Tabor says. "The Shakespeare plot was just an excuse to put their dances on stage. They assumed an intellect that wasn't always there."

Tabor doesn't assume anything of the kind. Thus, during rehearsals for his first full-length choreographic effort, the character of Egeus is seen dragging his daughter Hermia away from her true love, Lysander, nearly 10 times, "so the audience gets the relationships into its head," Tabor says. "We don't leave a single detail out, bringing the audience along with the story step by step.

"I don't want to point fingers at any choreographer in particular," he continues, "but ballet's gotten a bad rap. People think it's too esoteric for them. I hear people saying, 'I can never understand ballet, it's so boring. I go there and see a bunch of people flitting around on stage.' "

To Wilcox the problem is essentially one of catering to local tastes. "Dance audiences in L.A. are used to giant grandeur," he comments. "Basically they never really had a company of their own who gave them what they wanted and they're used to going and paying big money to big theaters.

"The L.A. audience isn't particularly interested in contemporary ballet very much and even (Robert) Joffrey realizes this, because Joffrey, who never did many story ballets before, is now doing 'Nutcracker' (announced for 1988) and 'Romeo and Juliet.' They, like us, realize that it's what the general audience wants.

"We do things that excite even the husbands, who are normally there in the audience just to please their wives and would ordinarily fall asleep. And if they see Puck flying (on wires, like Peter Pan) and our special effects and Lesli Wiesner's virtuoso dancing (as Titania), they'll say 'Like, Wow! Ballet's fun, I want to go see more,' and eventually you're developing an audience, fans. You can give them something more intellectual later.

"You don't hand a kid Dickens before he knows the alphabet, and you won't catch us at Long Beach Ballet doing that either."