

Review: ‘The Rite of Spring’

San Antonio Express-News

Posted on 03/09/2013 by Deborah Martin

By Jasmina Wellinghoff/For the Express-News

Twenty five years ago, the Joffrey Ballet saved the revolutionary ballet “The Rite of Spring” from oblivion by staging the first production of the work 75 years after its famously tumultuous Parisian premiere in 1913. And San Antonio was part of it. The company presented its then-newly reconstructed version of “Rite” at the Lila Cockrell Theater under the auspices of the now-defunct Performing Arts Association.

This year, the Joffrey is marking the 100th anniversary of “Rite,” and this time, its San Antonio performance was sponsored by Arts San Antonio. It played to a packed and appreciative house at the Lila Cockrell Friday (March 8).

Though a century has passed since Parisian audiences were so shocked by Igor Stravinsky’s dissonant score and Vaslav Nijinsky’s “new dance” choreography that they rioted both inside and outside the theater, the piece still feels new and different although it has lost its power to shock. It depicts an imaginary pagan ritual that celebrates the spring rebirth of the Earth by sacrificing a young maiden to Yarilo, the god of the sun and fertility in pre-Christian Slavic mythology. It’s divided in two parts, titled “Adoration of the Earth” and “The Sacrifice.”

Stravinsky’s eloquent music sets the stage for what’s to come in the prelude with a melody that seems to echo some primordial fear of humanity, helpless in the face of natural powers. Then the stage comes alive with groups of young people dancing in joy and anticipation. But they don’t dance like ballet dancers. They stomp around flat-footed, often hunched forward, sometimes hopping with feet pressed together, sometimes jumping with legs wide open, maintaining either tight circular formations or running all over the stage in exaltation. An old Sage (Jack Thorpe-Baker) and his Elders join the tribes and the Sage kisses the sacred ground that feeds and supports them. The rhythms keep on shifting and the folksy costumes fill the stage with lots of color.

Yet one wonders whether the current revival has somehow softened the original choreography and scenario. Neither the tribal nor the sexual tensions described in historical reports come across much in this version. More disturbing emotionally is the “Sacrifice,” in which a maiden who stumbles and falls is chosen to be the sacrificial lamb. While the other young women circle her in ritualistic dancing, she stands impassively in the center for a long while, simply accepting her fate. Nijinsky reportedly ordered his dancers not to act but to express themselves entirely through focused movement.

As all the villagers gather around, she (Elizabeth Hansen) starts a dance that will end in exhaustion and death. The part requires great strength as the Chosen One repeatedly jumps straight up from a standing position with legs bent at the knees and thrust backwards. With the lights darkening and the Elders in Bearskins watching her closely and reverently, she trembles and jumps, looks heaven-ward repeatedly and jumps again and again until she finally collapses. The scene becomes more and more hypnotic as it progresses to the tragic end.

In addition to “Rite,” the program held two contemporary works: “Age of Innocence” by Edwaard Liang, and “In the Middle Somewhat Elevated” by William Forsythe. The former, which opened the evening, is a lovely multilayered contemporary ballet inspired by the male-female relationships depicted in Jane Austen’s novels. Featuring eight men and eight women, it conveys the restrained formality of Austen’s time which could both stifle and encourage love. Along the way, the choreography surprises with fresh and fluid partnering configurations, especially in the two pas de deux danced by Jeraldine Mendoza and former San Antonian Mauro Villanueva, and April Daly and Dylan Gutierrez.

Forsythe’s piece couldn’t be more different. Framed by a black-box stage illuminated by two shafts of rather harsh light, “In The Middle” features dancers engaged in a balletic marathon set to a percussive electronic score that evokes the sounds of relentless machinery. The kinetic energy on stage is mind-blowing, the dancers athletic and impressive, but the piece is experienced primarily as an exercise of skills and an endurance test.

Presented together, the three disparate works kept the audience engaged and intellectually stimulated throughout.

Jasmina Wellinghoff covers dance for the Express-News.