

## **Review: 'Romeo and Juliet'**

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By Jasmina Wellinghoff/For the *Express-News*

Shakespeare's play "Romeo and Juliet" has been retold in dance many times but the 30-minute version created by Fort Worth choreographer Paul Mejia must be one of the most innovative, most original takes on this iconic and familiar story.

First performed in 1977, the ballet has been revived more or less regularly since then with a number of famous ballerinas dancing the role of Juliet. Mejia Ballet International's latest restaging of the piece was presented Wednesday night (May 1) at the Majestic Theatre under the auspices of Arts San Antonio. It's unlikely than anyone in that audience will ever forget it.

Visually stark and narratively succinct, the ballet opens with Juliet (Olga Pavlova) lying seemingly dead in the Capulets' tomb, with Romeo (Yevgeni Anfinogenov) standing above her, thinking that she is indeed dead. The two protagonists, who are clad entirely in white, are surrounded by motionless figures in black, identified in the programs as "Shadows and Angels." Enhanced by Tony Tucci's lighting, it's a startling scene that makes you hold your breath. Then, after Romeo swallows the poison and actually dies, and Juliet awakes, the plot moves back in time as the stage is transformed into a ball scene. We see the young couple meet and fall in love while the black figures swirl around them, looking more like agitated bats than dancing party guests.

That literal and metaphorical juxtaposition of black and white continues throughout the piece, heightening the effect of both the malevolent forces that pull the lovers apart and of their lyrical love duet that resonates so beautifully with Tchaikovsky's music. Real-life husband and wife and long-time partners, Pavlova and Anfinogenov are a joy to watch – he, tall, elegant and dashing; she, supple and expressive, with pristine footwork and a delicately eloquent demeanor.

The only other character from the play who makes an appearance is Tybalt (Andrey Prikhodko), whose fight scene with Romeo consists of powerful criss-crossing jeté leaps that are as sharp as swords.

The ballet ends with a visually gorgeous scene featuring the symbolically resurrected lovers draped in a huge semi-circular cloth, held aloft across the entire stage by angels – this time dressed in white. Stunning!

The other memorable piece of the evening was "Café Victoria," set to the tango music of Astor Piazzola. Here, Mejia accomplishes a fusion of tango and ballet by preserving the spirit of the passionate and sexy Argentine dance while expressing it entirely in balletic

terms. A man, portrayed by Mindaugas Bauzys, ventures into a nightclub where a beguiling denizen (the crisp and virtuosic Vilia Putruis) takes him under her not-so-tender wing, engaging him in fierce dancing while an octet of bar girls in the background execute a variety of moves on and around high stools, both behind and in front of metal frames representing bar counters. The choreography sizzles, and the lighting, the charged late-night energy and sultry mood of the piece are all pitch-perfect.

By comparison the remaining two works on the program – “Jeux” set to Debussy’s score and “Serenade in A,” inspired by Stravinsky’s eponymous composition, came across as rather tame, especially the former. Despite the abilities of the three dancers – Marina Goshko, Sarah Marr and Prikhodko – this tennis-based escapade is not especially engaging thematically or in terms of choreography. “Serenade” is more interesting as Mejia essentially shows his understanding of the four movements of the music, resulting in a smart, cool and disciplined ballet for four ballerinas: Michele Gifford, Mishic Libertore, Lea Essmyer and Grace Cuny.

To allow time for set setups, Arts San Antonio added two spoken-word interludes between the dance works, featuring poet Nicholas Hernandez. He first delivered his own poem “Tango” and later read excerpts from Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet.”

On the whole, the show concluded Arts San Antonio’s season on a high note.

*Jasmina Wellinghoff covers dance for the Express-News.*