



BALLET REVIEW

Walerski's minimalist Romeo and Juliet somehow has elusive quality of feeling new

Excellent performances make the production at Queen Elizabeth theatre in Vancouver both powerful and laconic



A scene from Mehdi Walerski's minimalist *Romeo and Juliet*, danced by Ballet BC and the Arts Umbrella Dance Company at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver.

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There is not a speck of colour on stage in Medhi Walerski's minimalist *Romeo and Juliet*, which uses the spectrum between white and black as a comprehensive design palette. Yet this stylish continuum of grey – and certainly the choreography that enlivens it – is so dramatically vibrant that you may think you're seeing colours that aren't there.

The French-born Mr. Walerski, who has worked for more than a decade as a dancer and choreographer with the Nederlands Dans Theater, has created a powerful and laconic *Romeo and Juliet* that has that elusive quality of feeling new. Having its world premiere at Ballet BC this week, the production uses most of Sergei Prokofiev's original score, but the vocabulary is markedly contemporary. The centre of gravity for Juliet (Emily Chessa) is low, so that every turn, lift and suspension suggests her ability to resist.

The motif of resistance, both in its physical and thematic applications, might be a good way to frame the production. Mr. Walerski is a choreographer who makes clear, theatrical choices and seems deeply invested in conceptual coherence – there's a constant dynamic interplay between the individual and the crowd.

The ballet begins with a breathtaking image: the cast standing in a horizontal line in total stillness. The Capulet parents are dressed in austere, neck-high black, while Juliet is in a modern-looking white pinafore. Mr. Walerski designed the costumes and everything has a sharp, geometric edge, right down to the black and grey checkers on the wide-hooped dress of the nurse (Alexis Fletcher). The characters stare forward with the same sharpness, as though defying their inevitable fate.



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The defiance is reprised in Mr. Walerski's ensemble work, which impressed me for both its choreographic detail and its compositional arrangement on the stage. The warring factions of young Capulets and Montagues appear in fluctuating configurations (preprofessional dancers from the Arts Umbrella Dance Company have joined Ballet BC to provide a more substantial corps). The dancers cross each other in a series of quadrants, swiftly repositioning themselves in clumps, lines and circles, so that the crowd comes to have a character of its own.

But Mr. Walerski sinks deep into his dancers' bodies and reimagines this centuries-old story at a real physical level. He makes use of intricate shoulder articulations and pulsing torsos, choreography that would be compelling on a soloist and is doubly captivating to see on a group, sometimes synchronized and other times in staggered counterpoint. The famous section of music that plays at the Capulet ball (The Dance of the Knights) accompanies a sensual and sinister party of women in black sheer turtlenecks and long skirts, curving in and out of voluptuous back bends as they laugh in expressionistic slow motion. When Paris (Matthias Vaucher) dances with Juliet, he poses a real physical threat, his arms vulture-like as they hover over her body, forcing her into lifts that seem to capture her in the act of running away. When Romeo (Brandon Alley) and Juliet lock gazes, they are ghosts in white, eye-catching against the darkness.

Mr. Walerski has given Romeo some particularly lush choreography as a young man falling in love for the first time. Mr. Alley succumbs to new bodily impulses; his spine softens, his arms weigh heavily, there's extra space in his lower body. It's a brilliant physicalization of that "melting feeling," the sinewy floppiness of being drunk on love.

I found it hard to believe that Act 2 was even stronger. The bedroom *pas de deux*, unfolding on a stark white set with just a bed and a few big enameled rectangles, is full of tussling, expressive floor work. Ms. Chessa frequently leaves a leg wrapped around (or near) Mr. Alley's neck, so that as they move and roll, their bodies appear hooked together. Fluid sequences of motion and lifts are accented with sensitive pauses. When Romeo leaves and Juliet's parents instruct her to marry her Paris, Ms. Chessa performs a visceral solo – some of the best choreography in the show – ending with a harrowing silent scream.



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The last quarter of the production has some of the most inventive compositional ideas. When Juliet makes her fated journey to Friar Laurence for help, she is surrounded by dancers dressed in black who snake around her legs and lift her high in the air. They seem less like people and more like an embodiment of motion, or the dark forces of fate itself. For the crypt, Mr. Walerski has Juliet inert under a huge white sheet held tautly by the encircling black-dressed corps. Romeo must pull the giant sheet across the stage to reveal her body.

It is these final images – their ability to create unforgettable sequences and tableaux through the simplest means – that reveal Mr. Walerski at his most visionary.

But he is helped in good measure by the company. The production is full of excellent performances (Scott Fowler as Mercutio, Gilbert Small as Tybalt, Patrick Kilbane as Benvolio). Nothing on the Canadian dance landscape is quite like Ballet BC, an ambitious company that blurs the line between classical and contemporary and finds its riches not through extravagant spending, but through this kind of craft and thoughtful innovation.

Romeo and Juliet continues at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver until Feb. 24.

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