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DANCE

Review: Ballet Arizona's 'Napoli' Embodies a Culture of Exuberance

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY FEB. 16, 2015

PHOENIX — Naples, a city I adore, and its environs burst to life onstage in "Napoli," a ballet choreographed in 1842 by August Bournonville. When the curtain rises on Act I, the audience applauds the view of the city's famous bay, with Vesuvius dominating the horizon. When it rises on Act II, the applause is accompanied by gasps, because here we're in the Blue Grotto of Capri. Act III is not set in any location so famous, but there's something so picturesque about its bridge and pilgrim shrine that the audience applauds anyway.

The enterprising Ballet Arizona is the first American ensemble to stage this classic. This company has become one of America's finest — and "Napoli" is like no other ballet. For it is a guide not just to tourist destinations but also to that Italian city's heartbeat. It celebrates the ebullient openness on which the Neapolitans pride themselves; it shows their abundance of gesture, their intense emotional volatility, their embodiment of what would later be called verismo and their impassioned Catholic piety. No royalty or noblemen here. Leading characters include a fisherman (the hero, Gennaro), a macaroni seller and a lemonade seller.

Each act is in a different vein. The abundance of exuberant mime and of urban life that fills Act I does not prepare you for the otherworldly Romantic adventure of Act II, in which the sea spirit Golfo tries to turn Teresina into his naiad consort. And neither prepares you for the joyous eruption of dance, dance, dance in Act III. The classical ballets of the Franco-Russian tradition place refined ballet at the summit of dance style, but in Bournonville's work, the marvelous pas de six is a prelude to the yet more intoxicating tarantella, which

is, in turn, capped by an ensemble gallop. Guns fire, confetti falls, and our spirits keep climbing.

Traditionally, "Napoli" belongs to Bournonville's home company, the Royal Danish Ballet in Copenhagen. But I've also seen it danced by other companies, in Edinburgh (Scottish Ballet) and, yes, in Naples itself (the ballet of the Teatro di San Carlo, where Bournonville once performed). It's good to add Phoenix to that list.

The Danish choreographer Ib Andersen, who first performed in "Napoli" as a child of 7, has been Ballet Arizona's artistic director since 2000. He has become a true ballet master: I've traveled to Phoenix to see his stagings of Balanchine (he was a luminary of New York City Ballet from 1980 to 1990) and his own productions of "The Nutcracker" (one of America's best) and "Cinderella." Now there are tiny Arizona children playing the parts that he and his contemporaries once did in Denmark, and the stage of Symphony Hall in Phoenix is full of committed talent, evoking both Naples and Copenhagen at the same time. In the often revised Act II, Mr. Andersen's version has very effectively changed geometries for the corps, and makes Golfo (Brian Leonard) chilly even in his abusive desire for Teresina.

"Napoli" requires that performers gesticulate gorgeously. (I find few human acts more sensuous to behold than a Neapolitan in full flow; Bournonville evidently felt the same, since his Act I often has at least six unrelated mime conversations unfolding at the same time, even when only one of them, center stage, is vital to the narrative.) For the dancers, the work demands long, suspenseful, action-packed phrases of jumps and turns, now hitting the beat in midair, now pouncing to land on it and then take off again. There are sustained adagio sequences of linear grace and perfect decorum. We see not just the Neapolitans' energy but also the importance they accord to basic elegance and, despite strife and quarrels, courtesy.

Though much of this is far from home for American dancers, it's astonishing what they achieve here. Only in peripheral roles did mime sequences look stiff. Giacomo the macaroni seller (Carlos Valcárcel), and Peppo the lemonade seller (Roman Zavarov) were naughtily funny, and the street singer Pascarillo (Ilir Shtylla) a source of bubbling hilarity. The two leading

roles, Gennaro and Teresina, were taken in a performance I saw by the handsome and engaging Alejandro Mendez and Arianni Martin, who both joined the company in 2013 after defecting from Cuba. The other Teresina was Jillian Barrell, who since 2007 has become a central artist here. Her radiance, though marred by a tendency to play the role with her mouth hanging open, acquired a fresh vitality.

Best of all was the Gennaro of Nayon Iovino, a Brazilian who joined this troupe in 2012. In his entrance, his grand jeté en attitude (a leap with rear leg bent at the knee), sailing toward the audience, and his broad grin lighted up the stage at the same time. In later scenes, his acting was so full-bodied and so naturally timed that it seemed not that he was responding to the score but that the music illustrated his every thought.

Musicality and through-the-body commitment, above all, are what distinguish this "Napoli." Though Mr. Iovino is the exemplar, there's a shared company understanding of these virtues, which continually dart straight to the heart. In matters of timing, especially, it seems that Mr. Andersen has distilled the essence of his Danish training and transported this ballet to Arizona mint-fresh.

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