



A thing of Beauty



Photos by MIKE SIMONS / Tulsa World

Left, the international ballet superstar Viviana Durante dances the lead role of Aurora in Tulsa Ballet Theatre's presentation of "The Sleeping Beauty." Right, Durante, as Aurora, lives up to the ballet's title, as she falls into deep slumber through witchcraft. The production also featured the debut of the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra.

TBT offers star performances, superb orchestra

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So what did you go to see, those of you who were lucky enough to attend Tulsa Ballet Theatre's performances of "The Sleeping Beauty" this past weekend?

One of the finest, and most authentic, works of the classical repertoire? An international superstar, in the person of Viviana Durante, dancing the lead role? The debut of a new orchestra? A ballet company that many experts in the dance world consider one of the best in the country?

Well, you saw all of those things this past weekend at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center. You also saw something else: a glimpse of a potential future for Tulsa.

But first, let's deal with the past. Any ballet company that presents "The Sleeping Beauty" is offering a simultaneous look at ballet's past and present. It is one of the few ballets created by Marius Petipa for the Maryinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia, that has survived more or less intact in the 140-odd years since it premiered.

So watching this ballet is a bit like watching history come to life — especially when it's performed with the precision and personality as it was by the dancers of Tulsa Ballet.

We attended the Thursday invitational dress rehearsal as well as Friday's opening night performance, and each time the performances by the Tulsa Ballet company were impressive.

Even in the large ensemble scenes, there is no place for dancers to hide

— the technique has to be impeccable. And 99 percent of the time, the Tulsa Ballet dancers met this challenge with the sort of sweat-soaked skill that makes these steps look effortless.

The alternating languid and effervescent solos of the Fairies (Mehri Paydar, Serena Chu, Shelby Dyer, Kiri Chapman and Ashley Dangos on Thursday; Paydar, Chu, Rene Olivier, Megan Keogh and Elena Serna on Friday) were marvelously done.

The Precious Stones *pas de quatre* danced by Keogh, Chu, Ricardo Graziano and Justin McMillan on Friday, and by Chu, Serna, Graziano and

Wilson Lema on Thursday, gave each dancer the chance to show off classical chops with duets and solos that included deceptively risky steps.

Cecile Tuzii and Alexandra Bergman shared the role of the Lilac Fairy. Tuzii danced the part with an understated elegance, and Bergman brought a sunny serenity to the character. Both contrasted well with Daniela Buson's juicy take on Carabosse — a witch who definitely enjoys her work. In the parts of the White Cat and Puss in Boots, Dangos and Sarkis Kaltakchian on Thursday and Tuzii and Rupert Edwards on Friday brought out all the frisky humor, much to the delight of the crowds.

As Princess Florine and the Bluebird, Bergman and Michael Eaton had the parts Thursday, Ma Cong and Kristina Gonzalez on Friday.

Bergman danced the part with an airy lightness — she truly seemed to float around the stage — and Eaton and Cong simply soared.

But the reason why many people came to this ballet was to see Durante as Aurora, and her performance Friday night was a star turn in every sense of the word. Her dancing had an incredible force and confidence as she executed whip-quick pirouettes, graceful leaps and pointe work that made one think her feet must be made of steel.

For example, during the Rose Adagio in the first act, Aurora is supposed to hold an arabesque — standing on one pointe with the other leg extended behind her — with the assistance of a quartet of male dancers. On Friday, Durante held herself perfectly balanced for what seemed to be 30 seconds, as her putative partners were left to stand and watch. It was a feat of pure ballerina that just about stopped the show.

But Durante's performance wasn't simply a series of showstopping (and show-offy) moments. Every aspect of her dancing was impeccable, from the plumb-line perfection of her line, her precise and graceful arms, the clarity and depth of her acting. It was extraordinary to see.

She was partnered by Igor Antonov, who took on the role of the Prince at the last moment. His was a strong and noble presence, and his dancing was fine, although he did not bring to the character the emotional fullness that Cong showed Thursday. This might have been because Antonov had only a week to

prepare for the Friday performances.

In any case, Cong's performance as the Prince was exceptional, with every step infused with emotion. His languid solo in Act Two perfectly captured the character's melancholy and uncertainty, and his dancing during the wedding scene brimmed with barely contained joy. He also showed his generosity in partnering Gonzalez, who shared the role of Aurora with Durante.

For a young dancer performing this most difficult of roles for the first time, Gonzalez was remarkable. Her dancing had a playfulness — that coquettish roll of the head at the end of her pirouettes, for example — even during the most punishing technical passages. In the Rose Adagio, one could see her confidence growing as it progressed, so that those final arabesques were struck with real grace and deceptive ease.

This production also was the debut of the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra. It is an ensemble at once familiar (many of its musicians have performed in Tulsa for years) and brand-new.

My wife tends to cry at ballets; she is easily moved by the physical and emotional beauty that Tulsa Ballet regularly puts on the stage. This time, she started reaching for tissues before the orchestra, under the direction of TBT's music director, Ramona Pansegrau, was less than a dozen bars into the overture.

"They just sound so good," she said, and she was (as she so often is) right. The TSO brought a distinct and welcome depth and richness to

Tchaikovsky's score, playing with a cohesion and power that was thrilling to hear and that seemed to energize the dancers.

The orchestra also featured exquisite solos from its members, including Shannon Scott on clarinet, John Harrison on violin, Kari Caldwell on cello, Rachel Van Voorhees on harp, Lise Glaser on oboe and Elizabeth Brightbill on flute.

Oh yes, the future. Tulsa has been struggling in recent years to find something of which it can be proud, that it can point to and claim as uniquely its own.

That "something" has been before our eyes for more than half a century. It is the city's arts community, from the grand performing organizations such as Tulsa Ballet and Tulsa Opera, through smaller yet no less important groups such as the Signature Symphony and Theatre Tulsa, to visual arts venues from Philbrook Museum to Living Arts of Tulsa.

This is something that sets Tulsa apart. Few ballet companies can attract a star of the caliber of Viviana Durante and then surround her with dancers whose artistry and abilities do not look out of place next to hers. Few cities can create an orchestra, as well as a new way for that orchestra to operate, that sounds from the start as accomplished as the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra.

Any ordinary city can allow these things to fail, to disappear. Tulsa is not — and should never let itself become — an ordinary city.

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