



Bard meets Western: a challenge well met

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Ballet Fantastique rounded out its 10th anniversary season at the Hult Center on Saturday night with the premiere of a Wild West version of William Shakespeare's "As You Like It."

University of Oregon Shakespeare professor Rachael Hanan and master's scholar Lynn Freitas adapted the pastoral comedy from Elizabethan England to the American Wild West. Shakespeare meets John Wayne?

Touchstone, a court clown in the original becomes the cowboy narrator in this story ballet version. Adam Goldthwaite proved himself versatile with his drawl, whistling, banjo-playing and dancing.

A surprise of the evening came in the form of an Italian guest danseur, Alberto Liberatoscioli. His performance as Lando (originally Orlando) brought him much deserved applause.

Composer and pianist Jeremy Dekyle Schropp's original honky-tonk music and playing added authenticity to the evening. Somehow I would have liked to have heard more of his music and playing.

The dances were all performed to bits and pieces of taped music by Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, Jacques Offenbach, John Philip Sousa, Ferde Grofé and others. As an audience member, I find it difficult to transition from live to taped music.

The seven female dancers performed brilliantly. The choreography managed to meld classical ballet with the freer comedic Western style.

Special recognition goes to Hannah Joy Bontrager as Rosie (or Rosalind) and her male

doppelganger, Ashley Blake Bontrager as Annie Oakley, Leanne Michelle Mizzoni as Cupid, and Amelia Rose Unsicker as La Belle.

Newcomers Amanda Kay Coleman as Cece (originally Cecelia), Jordyn Lindsey Richter as Audrey, and Krislyn Ann Wessel as Phoebe are excellent additions to the company. All these women have strong technique and true charisma. They work together well as a corps, and they're also superb as soloists.

The evening was divided into a prologue and two acts. The prologue consisted of a clever silent film by Vanguard Media that introduced us to the characters and set the stage for the action to come. It even managed to include our very own Shelton-McMurphy-Johnson house.

Act One was in the Old Saloon (rather than the Royal Court). The dancing was fabulous, but I found the transitions between narration and dancing to be sometimes awkward.

By Act Two, which had moved to the Range of Ardenne (not the forest), the flow of the ballet and story was much smoother.

The dream pas de deux with Lando and Rosie was classically romantic and lovely to watch. Justin Feimster as Ollie and Adam Haaga as Silas were good dancing partners.

As Donna Marisa Bontrager states in the program, "the role of the women has been played up" in the Ballet Fantastique's version of "As You Like It." This was a wise decision. The seven women are most accomplished dancers.

This adaptation was quite an undertaking. Ballet Fantastique seems to constantly challenge both its dancers and its audience. From the sound of the applause, I would say the challenge was met.

Gwen Curran of Eugene reviews dance for The Register-Guard.