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Ballet a provocative take on 'Beauty'

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Choreographer Donald Byrd has a reputation for dark, sometimes aggressive dances. That is not the case with his version of Petipa's great ballet "Sleeping Beauty," which he retitled "Sleeping Beauty Notebook." The work was given its premiere by Spectrum Dance Theater, of which he is artistic director, this weekend at the Moore Theatre.

"Notebook," which takes the 19th-century ballet apart and puts it back together again, is at turns provocative, witty and ribald. It is often outlandish, rather rough and tumble, and, on occasion, irritating -- and too anxious to be politically hip. This is not for children or purists.

The 11 members of Spectrum, of whom much is demanded, sizzled in their performance Saturday night, dancing with considerable panache and no reserve. They lit up the stage with their energy, focus and outright talent. To be noted particularly are Julia Wilkins, double cast as Aurora in the second act and Carabosse here and there; Lara Seefeldt, Aurora in the first act; and David Alewine, the prince.

Byrd, a well-known choreographer of modern dance who took over Spectrum in late 2002, has an attraction to celebrated works in the ballet canon. "Beauty" is the latest example. His "Notebook" tells the essential tale, keeping many crucial passages, but gives them twists and turns that come straight out of his brain. Action is rarely straightforward and sometimes reiterated, in order or out of order. Carabosse's threat of death to the young Aurora is repeated and repeated and repeated, in various styles and intonations. Not only does Aurora have admirers, so does her Prince. Indeed, they run at him with seeming desperation. Petipa's "Beauty" has a happy ending; Byrd's "Notebook" does not: The prince dies, for no apparent reason.

Characters are more defined in Byrd's version. The Auroras are hardly innocent, and the prince often seems unsure. In varied forms, Carabosse is among the most amusing.

With its opulent formality yet intimate appeal, Petipa's "Beauty" represents civilized behavior, although with a veil of darkness. Byrd wants to strip away what he sees as a veneer of polite behavior to expose the emotional greed of human behavior. And he does so sometimes with hilarious results. Byrd does not hesitate to appear ludicrous and over the top, and it is those attributes that inform his "Notebook" and give it its idiosyncratic gloss.

A pop sensibility infiltrates the whole work, which lasts about two hours. Derived from the movies, television and stage, it can take on a burlesque quality. Just as "Beauty" is all about reserve and decorum, Byrd's "Notebook" is the opposite.

There are speeches galore in "Notebook," mostly tiresome and gratuitously jarring. Byrd's talent lies with movement, and that makes "Notebook" telling.

Just as Byrd rearranges the narrative to suit himself, so he rearranges Tchaikovsky's music, although much of it stays intact. Some of it is not part of the customary "Beauty." I was happy someone turned down the volume of the tape in the second act.

One of the most discordant aspects of Byrd's conception is his movement in connection with Tchaikovsky's music. One hears passages of the score with certain expectations, which Byrd purposely does not deliver, and it is wildly disconcerting.

Next month, Spectrum travels to New York for a series of performances of "Notebook" at Dance Theater Workshop.

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