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## Arabesques Alfresco

San Francisco Ballet at Sigmund Stern Grove: Dances by Tomasson and Balanchine

August 16, 2009

By

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San Francisco Ballet in Tomasson's *Swan Lake*. Photo by Erik Tomasson.

In ordinary years, the San Francisco Ballet's annual turn at the free Stern Grove Festival is the only opportunity that both local ballet fanatics and casual parties get to see the company in the seven-month drought between early May and mid-December.

But this is an exceptional year. On Sept. 22, the company will open a three-city tour to the People's Republic of China, so what this reporter and approximately 7,000 other souls experienced Sunday afternoon (Aug. 16) at the 72nd annual festival was a three-paneled preview of what audiences in Shanghai, Suzhou and Beijing will shortly enjoy. All repertoire performed on the Grove concert will be featured on SFB's premiere visit to the People's Republic (celebrating the 30th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations with the U.S.), but not necessarily with the casts who danced them alfresco last weekend.

It is no secret that this Chinese tour would not have happened without the participation of Shanghai-born ballerina Yuan Yuan Tan, who joined the company in 1995, was rapidly promoted to principal and has reigned as a distinctive presence ever since. Tan, however, withdrew from the Stern Grove date a few days ago, ceding Odette's feathers to colleague Vanessa Zahorian for Sunday's performance of Act 2 of *Swan Lake* in the revised staging that Tomasson prepared last season after Lev Ivanov's original. The costuming on this occasion derived from the old *Swan Lake* production by Jens-Jacob Worsaae, and this reporter was happy to see them restored to the stage, even briefly.

In any case, Zahorian and her colleagues, without the benefit of stage lighting, sets or formal wing space offered an absorbing account of the drama, from the initial entry of the 24 swans, all sharing the same musical impulse and all striking in their unanimity. Zahorian's white swan communicates the character's plight in a series of gripping tableaux, which may benefit from this dancer's histrionic restraint and tempered attacks. Once in a while, you hoped this Odette would break through that restraint and communicate some of the swan's tragic vulnerability, but this, in every way, was major league dancing. Poor Siegfried doesn't have much to do, but Sunday's exponent, Rubén Martín Cintas (who was simply Ruben Martin at the close of last season) offered an object lesson in empathetic partnering. Elena Altman and Lily Rogers exuded leggy appeal and rhythmic

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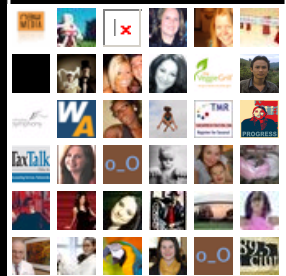


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vivacity as the two swan lieutenants. Music director Martin West conducted the Tchaikovsky score.

Artistic director Helgi Tomasson's 2008 *On A Theme of Paganini* (Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody for piano and orchestra) opened the program with last season's principal casting (with Frances Chung replacing Zahorian) and Jaime Garcia Castilla returning to active duty after a season plagued by injuries. The principals, who also included Maria Kochetkova, Davit Karapetyan and Pascal Molat, fared well, though Castilla looked a bit intimidated by the lifts. But the work remains a tepid exercise in neo-classicism, responsive to the composer's finest concerted work, but not deeply interpretive of it.

Tomasson sets the central pas de deux (to the familiar 18th variation) as a cozy routine with Kochetkova ending cradled in Karapetyan's arms, rather than as a gushingly romantic episode. Where the work mostly disappoints is in the choreography for the demi-corps and corps (18 dancers), who seem about as organic to this ballet as potted plants. If one had looked for some relationship, some tension between corps and principals (perhaps reflecting the tension in any piano vs. orchestra score), it was not to be found here. Roy Bogas was the savvy pianist, triumphing over the Grove's stark amplification system.

Watching Balanchine's Stravinsky Violin Concerto, I couldn't help wondering how Chinese audiences, many members of which may be exposed to the choreographer's angular, hip-jutting vocabulary will respond to the work. But some theater phenomena are universal. Surely, they will be thrilled by Sarah Van Patten's ferocious attack and elevation and her dazzling crab walk in *Aria I*, in which partner Pierre-François Vilanoba topped his performance last season by a wide margin. Cintas and Katita Waldo lent the conflict resolutions of *Aria II* great energy and Waldo's verticality is still a matter of wonder. Still, the final *Capriccio* for the complete cast looked in need of additional rehearsal; Balanchine's allusions to folk dance and other moments seemed compromised. A speedier tempo in the pit might help. Franklyn D'Antonio was the solo violinist. Those of us who arrived early had the pleasure of hearing a run-through of the score. Something to remember when making plans for next summer.

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\*Disclaimer: The views of Allan Ulrich are not necessarily the views of Voice of Dance

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