



GUSTAVO RAMIREZ AND HANNAH BONTRAGER IN 'MOON PRINCESS' FROM BFAN'S TALES FROM THE FLOATING WORLD (ACT I)

## A REPRISAL AND A WORLD PREMIERE

*Ballet Fantastique mesmerizes with Tales from the Floating World and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

From the first notes of Mitsuki Dazai's masterful koto playing, *Tales from a Floating World* erupts on the stage, a wash of color and contrast, in Ballet Fantastique's latest show, which ran March 3-5 at the Hult Center's Soreng Theater.

Opening with a spritely, fluttering array of turns and shapes, the ancient tale veers into the romantic, as dancers pirouette and elevate into robust, playful lifts. Ashley Bontrager and Gustavo Ramirez engage in a flirtatious dynamic, mirroring the plucking, timeless echo of the koto.

Ramirez is a strong theatrical presence, able to deliver nuance and gravitas within BFan's choreographic signature, which might not always call upon the full lexicon of movement traditionally at the disposal of men in ballet.

It's an aesthetic choice, one that has a surprising effect. Instead of focusing the men on the coloratura — runs, giant leaps, massive jumps — choreographers Hannah Bontrager and Donna Marisa Bontrager allow the men, like Ramirez, to use more facial expression and quieter, slower, more traditionally lyrical qualities. It works.

Late in the piece, an evolving quintet gives way to a rich duet, with an almost jazzy musical refrain from Dazai, supporting its mysteries. The work as a whole, which premiered in 2014, is evocative and lovely. It makes you want to read the stories yourself.

But at times, fleeting subtleties of posture and gestural refrain may veer towards caricature, as though the dance in these moments is an imagining of "Chinese movement" filtered through a Westernizing lens.

Act Two's *Crouching Tiger* premiere feels fresh and modern.

With choreography at once fluid and spirited, set to music by the Oregon Mozart Players (OMP) under artistic director Kelly Kuo, the piece features the phenomenal DaXun Zhang on cello.

Is there a better instrument than the cello? No, there's not. Okay, I'm married to a cello player, so I'm a little biased, but the instrument has a resonance and voice that parallels human voices, for all our foibles and emotional range: happy, sad, angry, scared.

Anyone familiar with the 2000 Ang Lee film knows Tan Dun's breathtaking cinema score, played here with ferocious appeal by OMP, with Zhang leading the way.

Costumes by Donna Marisa Bontrager, swathed in lighting by Justin Feimster, simply glow.

Hannah Bontrager attacks the role of Jen Yu with great intensity and timing. Leanne Mizzoni, Jim Ballard, Carolin Koeplin and Natanael Leal explore the yin and yang of feminine and masculine. And as Jade Fox, Amanda Coleman eyes the Green Destiny sword for herself.

The blending of art forms works well, although the sheer volume of OMP musicians threatens to drown out the dance. (Perhaps this could be a virtue of the Soreng stage, where the musicians are visible and their inadvertent upstaging is a risk.) Though the company takes liberties to squeeze this venerable Wuxia tale into 30 minutes, they've gotten the gist across. Suffice it to say, it doesn't end cheerily — but few stories this good ever do. ■

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