

REVIEW

# Dancers at top of their game

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## **The Magic Flute**

After an absence of six years, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet has arrived in town as a lean, mean, fighting-trim machine. The performance of *The Magic Flute*, choreographer Mark Godden's second full-length ballet, has a cast of 18, and considering the company is currently only 25-members strong, every dancer has to be at soloist level. This RWB roster of mostly Western Canadians, padded with Cubans and Ukrainians on the upper levels, is awash in talent. A former RWB member himself, Godden has created arresting choreography that fits the dancers like a glove.

Taking on Mozart's penultimate opera is a brazen act ofchutzpah. Behind its farcical fairytale veneer lies a mystical quest for ultimate truth imbued with Masonic symbolism and Age of Enlightenment rationalism. In visually translating this complex philosophical treatise into dance, Godden and his imaginative designer Paul Daigle have chosen well-defined props and whimsical costumes set in a stage that is a virtual black box.

With Montreal wizard Pierre Lavoie on board to create a magical kingdom of light, the basic elements of librettist Emanuel Schikaneder's plot, despite Godden's contemporary twist, remain intact. The sublime music (using Sir Neville Marriner's recording) has been pared down to great effect, augmented by Jean-Pierre Côté's atmospheric soundscape.

*The Magic Flute* begins with the hero Tamino having an encounter with a dragon. Godden's modern-day dragon (read dangerous influence) is a TV set to which his aimless Tamino (Johnny Wright) is addicted. Following the opera plot, the evil Queen of the Night (Tara Birtwhistle) seduces Tamino into saving her kidnapped daughter Pamina (CindyMarie Small) from the all-powerful guru Sarastro (Alexander Gamayunov), only Godden has made the

Queen and Sarastro an estranged couple with daughter Pamina as the battleground.

Like Mozart's nerdy hero, Godden's Tamino finds redemption through choosing light (Sarastro) over darkness (the Queen), and undergoes purifying rituals that ennoble him. Pamina is also put through trials to learn higher ideals, and in the ballet, must build a gigantic glass wall. Godden has turned Mozart's cowardly bird catcher Papageno (Jesus Corrales) into a sex-obsessed womanizer who cheats on his Papagena (Sarah Murphy-Dyson), while Sarastro's libidinous slave Monostatos (Arionel P. Vargas) has been transformed into a Sarastro acolyte gone bad.

Godden's distinctive dance vocabulary is a blend of gestural arms that incise space in a semaphore language of angles, circles and flexes, embedded over fluid footwork full of rapid turns and jumps that cover space like a whirlwind. By the end of the two-hour ballet, a certain sameness creeps into the movement, but more to the point, Godden does not stop the dance to mime his story. Rather, he manoeuvres this language of signalling arms and travelling feet to depict character, plot and relationships, with various degrees of success. One shining example is the pas de deux when the Queen ensnares Tamino to do her bidding. The charismatic Birtwhistle is an archetypal goddess, and with her highly charged deep pliés and commanding arms, she evokes the quintessential feminine mystique that runs roughshod over the pliable Wright's tepid follower.

Godden is strongest at more intimate moments; where he falters is in large ensemble numbers. For example, the relationship between Sarastro as teacher to his flock of followers is never fully developed. As well, Tamino's choreography is overshadowed by everyone else's, and he seems to never quite find his strength. Nonetheless, from Birtwhistle's alluring siren and Wright's endearing nebbish, to Small's beauteous ingénue, Murphy-Dyson's feisty lover and Gamayunov's stately leader, not to mention the Cuban technical monsters Corrales and Vargas, the RWB is at the top of its game performing Godden's engaging ballet.