

Royal Winnipeg Ballet's Svengali is a hypnotic mix of symbolism and bleak beauty

by JANET SMITH

A Royal Winnipeg Ballet production. At the Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts on Friday, April 20. Continues until April 22

Svengali is unlike any other ballet you have seen before, and it casts its own, strange spell.

Choreographer Mark Godden has concocted an oddly stylized, surrealist world where fairy-tale symbols collide with the militarism and decay of Weimar Germany. The title character's ballet-school-mistress mother is a wicked queen, inviting her brainwashed students to bite from an oversized, red apple, and dancing before her reflection in a row of oval mirrors. Svengali's victim, Trilby, meanwhile, buries a giant scarlet heart under a pile of leaves beneath a skeletal tree. The look and content is part Salvador Dali, part Brothers Grimm, by way of 1920s Berlin. And that's more than a little surprising coming from a company whose last visits here found towering, flashing windmills (*Moulin Rouge*) and oversized bunnies (*Wonderland*).

In the Victorian novel it's based on, *Trilby*, Svengali is an older, menacing hypnotist who uses his power to turn the title character into a celebrated singer. Here, Harrison James's Svengali is a young man, oppressed and mocked in the confines of his mother's ballet studio. When he finally escapes into the decadent world outside, he uses his hypnotic powers to control a prostitute named Trilby (Amanda Green), turning her into a popular nightclub dancer. But when his mother recruits her into her ballet world, with the help of the Morality Police, he begins to lose her.

Godden is interested in so much more: he plays morality against immorality, authoritarianism (symbolized by the ballet world and police) against freedom. There are critiques on celebrity, and on the idea that you must conform to have power. Godden doesn't shy away from the dark side either: there are two dramatic scenes of ballerinas committing shocking acts of self-harm.

James is an effortless, elastic dancer, but the character, so gently portrayed, can't compete with the menace or commanding power of Jo-Ann Sundermeier's Mother; she's severe and scene-stealing, though her young age may confuse some viewers. Green's Trilby, however, is a triumph, transforming from the alluring, sensual streetwalker early on into polished, *Giselle*-tutu'd perfection.

Svengali may be about big ideas, but it never slacks off on the dance. The opening of the second act, announcing Trilby's stardom, is a mindblowing, 20-minute physical marathon beneath three stylized chandeliers, with dancers entering and exiting in a flash and whisking off Paul Daigle's sculptural robes. The vocabulary is an innovative mix of classical, en pointe jumps and lifts with off-kilter kicks, flexed feet, and such military gestures as clenched fists and poker-straight arms. The soundtrack, which jumps wildly between the likes of Sergei Rachmaninov, klezmer bands, and Richard Strauss, is a bit distractingly far-flung.

Edged by cold metal sets, *Svengali* is too expressionistic and bleakly beautiful to compare to the more lush, accessible spectacles the RWB has put on in recent years. It even requires copious notes in its program to explain its symbolism. And there are moments when it seems positively subversive: just look at the scene when Mother forces her ballet students to step up to a scale and weigh themselves, and then leads the group to ostracize the one who's packed on a half pound. (On opening night, that was Vancouver's own, expressive Sophia Lee.) Love or hate his ballets, Godden is not interested in cookie-cutter ballerinas, and neither is he interested in formulaic story ballet.

His warped vision reaches its zenith in the final moments, a hallucination of a glowing, swinging chandelier and a lover crossing shards of broken hearts. When the curtain swung closed over that odd image, the audience members took a discernible pause to catch their breath before they broke into applause. For a split-second, it was like they were hypnotized.