

Dance Review: "Svengali" casts a deep spell

Robert Enright, art critic

Mark Godden is infatuated with the relationship between excess and restraint and his newest ballet, Svengali, runs hard at the tension between them. He sets this mesmerizing two-hour long ballet in Weimar, Germany, but the place is more an idea than an actual location. It is simply a site where two kinds of people vie for power.

On the side of control and discipline are Mother and her group of bullying, nasty Acolytes. She is supported by the military and a gaggle of enforcers called the Morality Police. If you smell in this coalition a whiff of Fascism, you've got a good nose for the abuses of power. The movements of this group are crisp and elegant, where a caress slips easily into a cuff to the head, and where a dalliance with a streetwalker can get a soldier executed. They use their bodies like instruments of repression.

It isn't that this world is without beauty, (after all, Mother's studio is called The Prettiest One of All Ballet Academy); the problem is the way that prettiness is enforced, who gets to do the judging, and what happens when you fall outside those rigid standards.

On the other side is Svengali, his entourage, and a cluster of wealthy aristocrats for whom life is a constant search for pleasure. Svengali's conflict with his Mother is deeply rooted, and when he discovers he can use hypnosis as a way of gaining control over women, he becomes an insatiate. The movement Godden sets on this group is sensual, lascivious, even a touch vulgar. That is a good thing.

On either side, whichever one is necessary, is Trilby, the character Godden calls, "the ultimate survivor". For her morality is negotiable and as pliant as her body when she works the city streets, on the lookout for food, money, and a way to retrieve her broken heart. The role is danced by Amanda Green and she is sensational. If I were the RWB, I'd insure her legs for a million dollars.

She is matched by Harrison James, the 20 year old Svengali, who grows in confidence and decadence as the ballet continues. Jo-Ann Sundermeier is perfect as his Mother; she's a light-footed dominatrix with an impeccable sense of restraint; and Svengali's three-women entourage (Emily Grizzel, Yayoi Ezawa and Sophia Lee), dance with just the right amount of sensuous precision. Godden likes to give us hints that these two visions are opposite sides of a double-sided mirror. If you look hard enough, they become the same thing.

There are so many superb scenes in Svengali that it would be tiring to list them. But what is apparent is that Godden's talent is developing in leaps and bounds (there is also a wonderful moment in Act II where the Acolytes dance en pointe, and then flutter their hands behind them, like tailfeathers, as if they were born-again swans from a different ballet). He is equally adept at choreographing for solo, pas de deux and ensemble pieces.

Godden also uses music brilliantly and it is a varied playlist; from Strauss's Also Sprach Zarathustra (probably better known as the theme for *2001, A Space Odyssey*), to a number of Rachmaninoff pieces; and from Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2, to the hypnotic rhythm of the 1st Movement of Philip Glass's Symphony No. 8. The way he uses the Liszt and the Glass as inducements to a kind of calliope madness, is startling. It runs counter to what we expect, and is all the more effective for that reversal.

Svengali is beautiful, challenging and a visual turn-on. The ballet is, simply, a triumph, danced with explosive discipline by this talented company.