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REVIEW

ballet.*magazine**Boston Ballet**'The Sleeping Beauty'**April 2009**Boston, Wang Theater**by Carla DeFord*

BOSTON BALLET

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Having seen the Boston Ballet productions of *The Sleeping Beauty* in 2001 and 2005, my expectations of the current offering were high. The performance I attended during the first week of the run was also the first to feature Misa Kuranaga (recently promoted to principal) as Aurora, and I wish I could say the entire production blew me away, but that's not the case.

Given that this was her debut in the title role, Ms. Kuranaga is certainly entitled to our indulgence as she refines her interpretation of it. She is a lovely dancer with beautiful soft *port de bras* and great technical accomplishment. What

I missed was accomplished acting. Unless a young dancer is extraordinarily gifted or extraordinarily well coached, perhaps it is too much to ask for dramatic maturity, but without it, the performance is, to put it mildly, incomplete.

Even her entrance was a bit disappointing because the set worked against her. In previous productions Aurora was first glimpsed at the top of a staircase. She paused for a moment and then descended like a creature dropped from heaven. In this production, although Aurora is first seen brightly lit in an archway, she enters by way of a few low steps; so there's less fanfare in her arrival. Also, she's dressed in pale pink so she's not well differentiated from the bevy of pastel-clad ballerinas already onstage. As a result, the notion that Aurora is the crucial character of this ballet, with the weight of the kingdom on her shoulders, is attenuated.

The arrival of Carabosse in the prologue, on the other hand, is filled with drama. The pathetic fallacy requires that the appearance of the malignant fairy be announced by thunder and lightning – so far, so good. Her arrival in a dark coach



drawn by her malicious followers is also effective. When she alights, however, it becomes apparent that this fairy is not nearly evil enough. She's rather well behaved, if a little miffed. When Gianni Di Marco played this as a drag role in 2001, it was unforgettable. The ferocity of the man was so over-the-top he even put glitter on his teeth, and when he opened his mouth to laugh uproariously at his own mischief, it seemed as if sparks were flying out. The difference between the Carabosse in this production and Di Marco was, as Mark Twain once said, "the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."

The curse of Carabosse is realized in Act I when Aurora pricks her finger on the spindle and faints. The Lilac Fairy, well danced by Kathleen Breen Combes, then saves Aurora from death by putting her to sleep, as promised in the prologue. In Act II we are introduced to the man who will break the spell: Prince Florimund, who was danced by Nelson Madrigal. Madrigal has a sweet stage presence, noble bearing, and excellent technique, but when the Lilac Fairy presented Aurora to him in a vision, the limitations of both Madrigal and Kuranaga as actors became more apparent. As Florimund tried to follow his princess through the formations of the corps that kept him from her, there seemed to be no urgency either in his desire to reach her or in her yearning for him. The scene is very close in feeling to Act II of *Swan Lake*. In both, the lovers are divided by a spell that controls their destiny, but in this performance one did not see Aurora and Florimund struggling against the weight of that enchantment.

To continue the comparison, the Act III *pas de deux* of *The Sleeping Beauty* is like *Swan Lake* with a happy ending. Aurora, released from the spell that bound her, is free to marry the man of her dreams (literally). Absent in this performance, however, was the sense that the princess's joy was informed by the suffering that preceded it. Instead of a fully realized character, what Ms. Kuranaga presented was a wonderfully achieved series of steps and poses. One hopes her Aurora, like the dawn for which she is named, will gain nuance over time.

A memorable Act III performance was given by James Whiteside (also newly promoted to principal) as the Bluebird. The role takes incredible strength as well as bravura technique, and he made it thrilling. His partner, Erica Cornejo as Princess Florine, was also notable for her beautiful phrasing.

The costumes for this production, especially the glittering headpieces for the women and the Bluebird, were gorgeous. Equally impressive were special effects such as the Lilac Fairy's boat, which sails across the stage in clouds of mist.

Although the orchestra gave a wonderfully compelling account of the score, I found the electronic enhancement of the music a bit too loud. The Wang is a huge theatre, and so speakers are necessary, but I saw *The Sleeping Beauty* twice: once from the balcony and once from the orchestra level, and in both positions I missed hearing a more natural sound. If the volume could be dialed back a little, I believe the impact of the music would actually be enhanced.

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