

Review: An absolutely stunning 'Giselle' at the Harris: Plenty of dance companies remake the classics — none quite like this



The English National Ballet performs Akram Khan's "Giselle" at the Harris Theater in Chicago. (Kyle Flubacker photo)



By **Lauren Warnecke**
Chicago Tribune

MARCH 1, 2019, 10:45 AM

When “Giselle” premiered in Paris in 1841, it was an immediate success, part of a trend revitalizing ballet for everyday socialites by abandoning the Greek legends preferred by the French aristocracy.

Part of “Giselle’s” appeal is that its first act is about “real people” — peasants, in fact — while the second plays into 19th century audiences’ fascination with the supernatural. Having fallen in love with Albrecht, a nobleman betrothed to another woman named Bathilde, Giselle sinks into madness, dies of a broken

heart, and becomes part of a ghostly world in which the Wilis — maidens abandoned on their wedding days — seek vengeance on their lovers.

“Giselle” offers one of the strongest living examples of Romanticism in ballet, demonstrating hallmark traits of the period. It showcased the then-relatively new phenomenon of pointework, and employed developing innovations in stagecraft such as trap doors and gas lighting.

Inevitably, jaws dropped that first night at the Paris Opera for Carlotta Grisi’s debut performance as Giselle, as they did last night for Alina Cojocarui in the North American premiere of choreographer Akram Khan’s ballet of the same name.

Khan’s “Giselle,” performed by the English National Ballet, runs through Saturday at the Harris Theater.

Like the 1841 original, Khan’s “Giselle” is about a woman who’s deceived by her lover and dies. Like the original, it unearths themes of class and gender, truth and deception, betrayal and forgiveness, virtue and vengeance.

This is a ballet that was created, in part, to bring more universal appeal to the dance world — to bring works to an audience of regular people. But 178 years after its premiere, “Giselle” often shows its age. It’s a clear product of Eurocentrism, part of a genre that feels increasingly out of touch for many audiences.

But when the curtain rose in the Harris Theater Thursday, it was immediately apparent that this was “Giselle” like we’ve never seen it. A corps of dancers faced upstage, with arms outstretched and fingers splayed, leaning into a massive concrete wall. They are called the Outcasts, who in this version, are a group of migrant garment workers let go from a shuttered factory by a group of apathetic landlords. Among the Outcasts is Giselle (danced by Cojocarui at Thursday’s performance) and Hilarion, a wheeler-dealer type performed by the extraordinary Jeffrey Cirio.

It is a scene that is, all at once, ominous and jubilant. There’s a clear passion for life contrasted by that looming wall, the other side of which we assume to be capitalist idealism and financial prosperity. But there’s a blithe buoyancy to the Outcasts’ movement — especially where Giselle is concerned — that kept me from feeling that life, for them, could probably be better. Khan has the cast plowing across the width of the stage, back and forth with countless hunched-over skips, arms swaying back to propel the dancers’ bodies forward at full speed. These patterns are contrasted by communal folk dances hinting to the harvest dances of “Giselle’s” original plot.

In the role of Albrecht, Isaac Hernandez is only noticeable for his tucked-in shirt, contrasting the other men’s longer kurtas. Though we all see the deception — noticed and called out in a physicalized spat between Albrecht and Hilarion — the courtship between Hernandez and Cojocarui feels so natural and genuine. Giselle’s iconic daisy solo is replaced by a gorgeous *pas de deux* palpating hand prints against

the wall, which somehow softens its otherwise intentionally overbearing presence on stage.

Khan imbues his signature style blending contemporary dance and classical kathak with moments instantly recognizable as coming from ballet. It's a melting pot of styles so clearly connected to the urgent themes of migration, immigration and assimilation in Europe which inspired Khan's change of setting in his "Giselle," and most certainly resonate on this side of the pond, too.

So, the world of the Outcasts might not be perfect, but it feels safe and loving — like everyone's working toward a common goal. Albrecht is understandably intoxicated by this community, and not just because he loves one of its members. This becomes clearer still when the wall lifts, tilting 90-degrees to reveal the landlords behind it. They are a ravishing group, with Bathilde among them — decked out in sparkling haute couture (by set and costume designer Tim Yip) — but, for lack of a better description, don't seem that fun to hang out with. It's been said that money can't buy happiness; this lot seems to embody the tenet. As Albrecht must choose between his own happiness and societal and familial expectations, these worlds literally oscillate as Giselle is engulfed by the Outcasts, commanded to death by the landlords when it's revealed she is pregnant.

Thank goodness for that, because without it, there wouldn't be "Giselle's" exquisite second half.

Here's another saying for you: In order to reject something, you must know what it is you're rejecting. In transforming "Giselle," Khan, dramaturg Ruth Little and his design team (Yip and lighting designer Mark Henderson) create a striking world that is fresh, original and relevant. But they do it respecting "Giselle's" origins, delicately unraveling the threads which have made it beloved by so many and braiding them back together piece by piece. It would have been easier to burn the whole thing down.

Khan's second act has all the trappings which make "Giselle's" white act so cherished; his spectral realm is recognizable for its floor patterns of unending bourees on pointe; a conflicted Giselle negotiating between virtue and justifiable wrath; and the implacable Stina Quagebeur as Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis, who throughout the whole thing wields a wooden bayonet. Also there: the iconic crossing lines of arabesque hops; Hilarion's undoing dance to his death; and the most unadulterated strains of composer Vincenzo Lamagna's magnificent adapted score — unequivocally conquered by the Chicago Philharmonic — in which several of Adolphe Adam's original motifs shine through.

It's stunning — all of it. And this should be said: this is perhaps the most satisfying dance experience I've ever had. I am certain I'm not alone in saying so.

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance critic.

lauren.warnecke@gmail.com

Review: “Giselle” by English National Ballet (4 stars)

When: Through Saturday

Where: Harris Theater for Music and Dance, 205 E. Randolph St.

Running time: 2 hours

Tickets: \$35-\$145 at 312-334-7777 (sold out, call the box office for waitlist) and www.harristheaterchicago.org

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