

# Geneva Ballet stuns Cape Town audiences

 By Debbie Hathway 14 Jul 2014

National Arts Festival artistic director Ismail Mahomed's invitation to the Grand Théâtre de Genève (Geneva Ballet) to perform in Grahamstown in early July this year brought the company to Cape Town afterwards and he put the wheels in motion for a tour to Bloemfontein, Durban and Johannesburg in 2015.



Geneva Ballet's Lux & Glory programme, so generously accommodated within Cape Town City Ballet's scheduled Ballet Beautiful run at the Artscape Theatre, was an unprecedented success. What a joy for a reviewer to write without thinking about the box office - all three performances sold out without need of additional promotion. Their reputation preceded then and they delivered on every level - a company of stars, led by ballet director Philippe Cohen.

Their reception in Grahamstown was just as good - audiences scrambled to get seats in the Guy Butler Theatre and loved Geneva Ballet's production of *Le Songe d'une nuit d'été* (A Midsummer Night's Dream), accompanied by the KZN Philharmonic. "The company also takes home memories of a wonderful visit to the nearby Addo Elephant National Park," says Cohen.

## Delighted by the enthusiastic response



I sought him out at interval on the opening night of Lux & Glory. He was clearly delighted by the enthusiastic response to a piece that falls flat in China apparently. "They don't like it," he says. "It's too far away from their culture."

He says it's metaphysical, a meditation or a pre-death lullaby (which would explain the skeletal etchings on the dancers' upper-body coverings).

Conversations around me fluctuated between rapturous wonder at the skill and dexterity of the performers to the quest for narrative; one audience member said she was spellbound throughout; another found it repetitive and couldn't wait for it to end. "Just listen to the music then," her friend advised. She has a point. The "sensitive, ethereal sweetness" of Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem in D Minor, Op 48* is mesmerising. Those unfamiliar with the entirety of the piece should recognise the haunting *Pie Jesu* towards the end.

Ken Ossola's choreography progresses from extended introductory floor work by the mostly prostrate bodies, punctuated with twitches of wrists and knees, into duets shaped by cause and consequence of movement and some fascinating trio

work. Kees Tjebbes' lighting design played a starring role, too, enhancing the spiritual quality of the piece. The costumes by Jean-Marc Puissant displayed the sculpted bodies to great effect, allowing them to move with absolute precision, balance, control and extension. A Financial Times journalist points out the choreographer's history with Nederlands Dans Theater, and his work with the acclaimed Jiri Kylián, which comes through in his "sculptural combination of classical lines and contemporary impulse, the fluidity of his low lifts are clearly reminiscent of the Czech master".

## A lengthy standing ovation and umpteen curtain calls

Interestingly, the audience's response to Adonis Foniadakis's *Glory*, with a lengthy standing ovation and umpteen curtain calls to conclude the programme, could indicate that this one was the opening-night favourite. Opinions no doubt varied, but there was at least one point to agree on - it was wild!



Foniadakis's choreography to George Frideric Handel's powerful baroque music, enhanced by Julien Tarride's electronic modified musical transitions, requires the dancers to perform at a pretty manic pace. It's a tribute to their level of fitness, certainly, as they show no sign of tiring throughout the 60-minute work.

Technically faultless, I particularly enjoyed the way the dancers interpreted the movements; always on time but slightly different in execution. It did not jar as a lack of synchronicity in a corps de ballet might; it made their performance all the more compelling.

Costumes by Tassos Sofroniou and superb theatrical lighting by Mikki Kunttu add extra dimensions to a work that demonstrates "mastery and quality of movement". "It's like a rock concert, but to Handel's music," says Cohen.

*Glory* has not won kudos everywhere that it's been performed, but Cape Town audiences clearly can't get enough of this level of artistry. It's testament to the fact that, ultimately, the Geneva Ballet exists because "dance matters... performance art matters, and artistic experience matters - both collectively and individually."

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