

Ballet: Journey to the West

John Daly-Peoples
The Lady of the Camellias
Taipei Ballet
Civic Theatre, Auckland
September 20-21

If the Auckland Festival is supposed to reflect the various ethnic groups of the community, the Taipei Ballet did it for the Asian community who comprised at least threequarters of the audience.

Most Europeans have been exposed to the crossover of art between west and east but this has generally been the west adapting Asian art forms and themes. When the reverse occurs it is often unsettling in its originality.

Western dance is traditionally about the conveying of emotional ideas through expressionist body movement and facial display while eastern dance tends to convey ideas based around symbolism and patterning.

It is the linking of these two aspects that gave the Taipei Ballet's work an unsettling ambience, turning the familiar into the unfamiliar.

The story, based on the opera La Traviata, tells of the doomed courtesan, concentrating on the conflicting demands of lover, protector and father.

As the Baron, Chen Wu-Kan was dynamic and energetic with an assured acting ability giving the role a strong presence. Daniel Cimpean (Armand), looking like a young Nureyev, had a strong athleticism tempered with refined and controlled movements. He dominated the stage with an imposing individuality.

The two men provided an energetic duet in the opening scene in a display of sexual desire and jealousy in competing for Marguerite's affection.

Chen Wu-Kan gave a frenetic and venomous performance conveying his confused feelings of love and vexation to which Cimpean's bravura flowing movements provided a superb foil.

Both men achieved some remarkable lifts with their female partners as well as some intricate contortions. They revealed high levels of skill and an innovative way of conveying emotional relationships.

The love duo danced by Yu Otaki (Marguerite) and Cimpean was a tender and realistic depiction ranging from the playful to the erotic in a flawless display of stylish dance. The finale scene of Marguerite's death with a shower of blossom was tender and moving, with Cimpean's muscular body becoming a graceful funeral canopy. The only distraction was Yu Otaki's tendency to smile with little variation.

The casino scene presented an innovative approach, with the corps de ballet attired as card suits along with the Joker and Lady Luck.

This involvement of luck and fortune of the gambling table underscored the looming aspects of fate and destiny. But it was an idea choreographer NengSheng Yu extended too much and weakened the dramatic tension of the scene.

The music, taken from half a dozen Verdi operas including La Traviata, was well matched to the dance, and unlike many other canned music accompaniments the sound was balanced with perfect levels.