

Rocky Mountain News

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'Corsaire' is rare treat for patrons, neophytes

By Marc Shulgold, Rocky Mountain News
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Don't let the title fool you - Colorado Ballet's *Le Corsaire* (The Pirate) spends only a minute or two on the bounding main with those vandals of the high seas.

This compact tale, which opened over the weekend at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House, is merely an old-fashioned, colorfully costumed love story: A pirate and slave girl fall in love, he frees her from the harem and they live happily ever after.

Originally a convoluted three-act ballet, this staple of Russian companies has been trimmed to a manageable two acts by Eldar Aliev, a former Kirov dancer. Audiences are the beneficiary - along with the work itself.

Face it: Ballet is not about crazy plot lines, character development and dramatic crises. Ballet is about dancing. And there's tons of it in this production. It doesn't get more superficially pleasurable than this.

The costumes of Galina Slovyeva provide plenty of eye candy, as do the imaginative painted drops of scenic designer Simon Pastukh. Best of all, Aliev has set some delightful choreography on the dancers.

The corps enjoys many attractive moments of unison ensemble, soloists make the most of an extended *pas de trois* and *pas de quatre*, and the principals cash in big time on solos and *pas de deux* that emphasize lovely adagio steps along with crowd-pleasing leaps and barrel turns.

At Saturday's performance, Sharon Wehner and impressive newcomer Alex Tyukov danced the love-birds Medora and Conrad. With the recent departure of Wehner's longtime partner, Koichi Kubo, one worried about the success of this new pairing. Such concerns proved unfounded.

The diminutive Wehner and the tall, powerfully built Tyukov match quite well. When their characters first lock eyes at the slave auction, the two are sweetly fixated on each other, with not a clichéd extended arm or hand-on-heart to be found.

Aliev saved *Corsaire's* greatest hit for near the end: the bravura *pas de deux* (often danced as a stand-alone in showcase performances). Here, Wehner and Tyukov made beautiful music together, though his solo variations proved less explosive than hoped. Wehner has never been more elegant, displaying an ideal line, sympathetic acting and previously untapped athleticism.

Secondary roles were capably handled by Asuka Sasaki (as the slave girl Gulnara) and Shunsake Amma (the slave-selling Lankendem). Comic relief was provided in abundance by guest dancer Gregory Gonzales (Pasha).

Praise is also due the trio of Odalisques in Act Two - Dana Benton, Shelby Dyer and Sayaka Karasugi - who excelled in *Corsaire's* other familiar snippet.

Collectors of ballets will want to catch this production, rarely seen in the West. Best of all, the story is so simple, the staging so crisp and eye-catching that casual fans (and their children) will find much to enjoy. Just don't expect a stage filled with mangy, menacing buccaneers. These are not pirates of the Caribbean.

Le Corsaire

- **Grade:** B+

- **When and where:** 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday in the Ellie Caulkins Opera House, 14th and Curtis streets

- **Cost:** \$19 to \$145

- **Information:** 303-837-8888

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