

'Raffaella' Review: An Enchanted Elegy

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Leah McFadden stars in 'Raffaella.' Photo: Kelly Pratt & Ian Kreidich
South Bend, Ind.

"Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away" is not where most new ballets begin these days. Last weekend, however, at the Morris Performing Arts Center here, a new full-length story ballet called "Raffaella" transported audiences to a romanticized version of 18th-century Italy, where a young girl's love for a mysterious prince blesses her life in unexpected ways. Choreographed for more than 30 dancers by Claire Kretzschmar, artistic director of Ballet Hartford and a former soloist at New York City Ballet, and set to a sweeping new score by American composer Michael Kurek, the production is a moving tribute to a late dancer whose story is as beautiful and heartbreak as any fairy tale.

Raffaella Stroik, a South Bend native, was a gifted young ballet dancer and faithful Catholic who died in a tragic drowning accident in the winter of 2018, while on a spiritual retreat. Only 23 years old, she was forging a career as a professional dancer with the St. Louis Ballet, with whom she enjoyed performing classic story ballets. The following year, her parents—architect and Notre Dame professor Duncan G. Stroik and visual artist Ruth—decided to embark on the mammoth task of producing a ballet with a libretto inspired by Raffaella's

favorite productions and her own life. With the help of hundreds of donors, they recruited a team of artists from across the country to respond to their daughter's motto: "Beauty will save the world."



Paul Zusi (center) as the Prince. Photo: Kelly Pratt & Ian Kreidich

The ballet opens in the seaside town of San Michele. Mr. Kurek builds and sustains an enchanted musical atmosphere with shimmering chimes, faint bell sounds and sweetly wistful flute melodies. The set is stunning: Against a blue lagoon backdrop, a domed chapel stands in the center with a brightly painted altar, flanked by two white buildings with classical arches. (The designer is Raffaella's sister, architect Gabrielle Stroik Johnson.) The parents of Raffaella proudly present their newborn to the townspeople, who celebrate with festive group dances in pleasing formations with spirited jumps and lifts.

A stranger emerges from the crowd; he mimes that Raffaella will grow to be beautiful and loving, and gives her a rose. When he enters the chapel, a young man in white sails in—the Prince (Paul Zusi)—accompanied by three archangels, all of whom remain unseen by the crowd. As the music quickens, the Prince responds with leg beats, smooth barrel jumps and elegant arabesques, his upper body regal as he gestures lovingly toward the infant.



The cast of 'Raffaella.' Photo: Kelly Pratt & Ian Kreidich

We next see Raffaella (Leah McFadden) as a teenager. Ms. McFadden, a sensitive actress, appears carefree and dreamy, gliding on pointe with softly shaped arms, repeatedly turning in arabesque and slowly unfurling her leg in attitude. She generously dances with a crippled man and instantly re-gifts a bouquet of roses. The Prince, a watchful guardian and Christlike figure, reappears when she is praying alone. He invites her to perform a duet, and teaches her new steps that she later shares with friends. At the end of Act One, the Prince quells an attack on the town, leaving only a rose on the ground as evidence.

Act Two takes place in Rome, where Raffaella is intimidated by dancers in sumptuous clothing performing sophisticated steps in canon. A barre appears onstage, and Raffaella finds herself in a ballet class led by the Emerald Queen (Christina Ghiardi)—a seeming nod to Violette Verdy, the original lead in Balanchine's "Emeralds" who taught the real-life Raffaella at Indiana University. The smiling Queen gently corrects her placement, and then performs an exquisite solo herself, replete with delicate bourrées with elegantly emotive arms.

Raffaella falls for her classmate Ombroso (Mark David Bloodgood), but when she rejects his gift of a black crown, he becomes villainous. A sort of spiritual battle ensues—Ombroso summons an army of dancers who contort their upper bodies and hide their faces, but they are eventually routed by the Prince, his archangels and a group of white-clothed dancers, who fight the evil creatures with powerful split jumps and arabesques in sharp lines.



Christina Ghiardi (center) as the Emerald Queen. Photo: Kelly Pratt & Ian Kreidich

In the last scene, in San Michele, it is snowing. Raffaella enters alone and dances an airy solo with smooth piqué turns and reversés. Memories resurface: We briefly see Ombroso, the archangels, children from town and the Emerald Queen. The Prince then offers her a diamond crown and white veil, and gestures for her to come away with him, without her family. She agrees, and he crowns her, kisses her hand, and then holds her aloft with her arms in a V-shape as he slowly walks through two diagonal lines of dancers, toward a beam of warm light.

Ms. Kretzschmar has choreographed an impeccably paced ballet that builds to a moving conclusion, propelled by Mr. Kurek's neo-romantic music that synchronizes closely with the pantomime. Raffaella Stroik once explained, "When I am on stage, I just feel this amazing joy and love and I just want the audience to feel that way." Anyone fortunate enough to have attended "Raffaella" will have felt just that.

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