



## His 'Othello' Is a 'Dance Above All'

By Lisa Traiger

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The first dance concert Lar Lubovitch ever saw, in the early '60s, changed his life. The one-time University of Iowa art student, who dabbled in gymnastics, recalls: "It was life changing in the old, corny way, truly an epiphany for me. I had never seen dance before." And what he saw, the influential Jose Limon Dance Company, sent him on a quest. First Lubovitch went to New York, where he auditioned and was accepted at the Juilliard School, and then he made a career as a dancer, founder of his own company and celebrated choreographer, whose works have entered the repertoires of many major modern dance and ballet companies, as well as graced the Broadway stage and even ice arenas, including a full-length "Sleeping Beauty" on ice.

On Thursday, American Ballet Theatre revives his most elaborate work to date, "Othello: A Ballet in Three Acts." Created in 1997, the ballet is an early entrant in the six-month Shakespeare in Washington festival.

It turns out that the first dance Lubovitch saw, "The Moor's Pavane," was Limon's 1949 distillation of "Othello." Using a simple lace handkerchief in this compact study, Limon explicated the interplay of deception and jealousy that tragically enveloped Othello and Desdemona. Lubovitch learned much from it.

"Clearly that dance entered my heart and held close to my imagination," the choreographer says.

Although "Othello" has had many distinctive dance productions over the centuries, including the 20th-century ballets by Serge Lifar, Jacques d'Amboise, John Butler and Kirk Peterson, Lubovitch followed his research further back than Shakespeare's 1604 edition. The Bard had found the story of "The Moor," a North African officer in the Venetian army, in the writings of Giraldi Cinthio, and that's where Lubovitch started.

"Of all of Shakespeare's stories, 'Othello' is the one that can be told best in pictures because it deals with such iconic and well-known figures and a universal set of emotions: jealousy and its destructive force. It's something that all humans are acquainted with as a powerful element in our existence," Lubovitch explains. "Dance excels in the demonstration of pure emotional states. This is something that is the particular domain of dance.

"My 'Othello' is a dance above all," the choreographer adds. "It's not a linear story or a literal telling of the story as we know it. Through dance and the devices of dance, we can relate to characters, and



American Ballet Theatre revives Lar Lubovitch's 1997 ballet "Othello," based on the Shakespeare drama. (By Paul Kolnik)

eventually their stories will unfold within that, within the movement structure. By the end, the characters, their drama, their dilemmas, will have all been commented on and their stories will have been told."

Over the years, casting the central role of "Othello" has brought its own controversies, particularly on the issue of whether the title character must be of African descent. "This is a very complex issue," Lubovitch says, "whether or not the character of Othello has to be cast as a black dancer. In my particular case, all the dancers dancing Othello in Washington are white, and they will be made up to be darker."

But, the choreographer argues, race is not the central point of the role, but a cultural difference: "The most important aspect of the character of Othello has more to do with him being different than being specifically black. He's an outsider in a society that is culturally very foreign to him. His behavior and his ability to be manipulated has far more to do with his cultural difference than his different skin color."

Othello; Kennedy Center Opera House; 202-467-4600; Thursday through Jan. 14

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