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DANCE REVIEW: Boston Ballet stages a soaring 'Eugene Onegin'

Choreographed with innovation and intelligence by the late John Cranko, Boston Ballet revives one of the most personable and accessible story ballets in its repertory.

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Larissa Ponomarenko and Gael Lambiotte in John Cranko's "Eugene Onegin." — Marty [+]

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Larissa Ponomarenko and Gael Lambiotte in John Cranko's "Eugene Onegin." — Marty [+]

By **Keith Powers**
For The Patriot Ledger
 Posted Feb. 26, 2016 at 11:09 am
 Updated at 12:42 PM

With the return of John Cranko’s “Eugene Onegin,” onstage through March 6 at the Opera House, Boston Ballet revives one of the most personable and accessible story ballets in its repertory.

Thursday evening’s spectacular opening served as a quick reminder why Cranko’s “Onegin” finds such favor with audiences.

With Lasha Khozashvili in the title role as the distant Onegin, and Petra Conti as the ingenue Tatiana, this staging builds on the captivating strength of its two stars.

Often ballets have obscure, elusive narratives—not this one. Cranko’s choreography, first presented by his Stuttgart Ballet in 1965, makes every detail of Onegin’s disdainful personality, and Tatiana’s infatuation-turned-to-realism, come crystal clear.

Cranko builds the story from Alexander Pushkin’s classic verse novel around dance opposites. The opening scenes find Onegin’s friend, the sensitive Lensky (effortlessly brought to life by Patrick Yocum), dancing attentively with his fiancée, Tatiana’s sister Olga (the thrilling Ashley Ellis). His solo and the subsequent pas-de-deux are loving, graceful, with gentle lifts and measured grace.

Then comes Onegin. Dramatically costumed in black, a stark contrast to the pastel and earth tones around him, Onegin’s pas-de-deux with the immediately

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<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="width: 60px; text-align: left;"> </div> <div style="width: 70%;"> <p>Church Hill Coffeehouse featuring Paul Doolittle and Kelsey Gilbert</p> </div> <div style="width: 10%; text-align: right; background-color: #D3D3D3; padding: 2px;"> <i>7:30 pm</i> </div> </div>						
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lovestruck Tatiana mocks Lensky's attentive stage movement. He gazes into the distance, even with his loving partner inches from his face. He lifts and envelopes his partner boldly, then loses attention and walks off.

The entire ballet mimicks itself in this fashion. Two dramatic scenes where love letters are torn to pieces—the first, as Onegin destroys Tatiana's hopes, the latter, at the end of the ballet, when Tatiana, now matured, crushes Onegin's own hopes at reconciliation—are the dramatic linchpins.

Most memorably, a pair of theatrical pas-de-deux—the first, a dream sequence when Tatiana fantasizes that Onegin returns her love, and the later, final good-bye—are cleverly modeled by Cranko to resonate off each other.

In the first, the highlight of the ballet, Tatiana spends most of the scene in the air, Onegin's powerful lifts supplying graceful support. In the finale, pitiable drags, violent lifts and painful-to-watch pushes and pulls mock the dream sequence's grace and power.


Cranko's choreography informs classic movement with modern dance language. Even his ensemble scenes, alternating between high-society balls and peasant dances, are infused with vernacular moves.

His storytelling never wavers, and the score—an amalgam of Tchaikovsky's music (none of it from the composer's opera on the same subject) by Kurt-Heinze Stolze—never leaves its service to the action either. Guest conductor David Briskin made a flawless debut in the pit, the orchestra sounding alert throughout. One passage, a violin solo (concertmaster Michael Rosenbloom) that morphs into duet with oboe (Barbara LaFitte), stood out.





The casting for opening night could not have been more appropriate. Khozashvili's Onegin commanded every scene, both in costume and stature. Yocum, as the yearning poet Lensky, danced magnificently. The mismatched sisters were typecast physically and emotionally: Conti's dancing and acting showed her growing into her role, and Ellis, as the flirtatious Olga, danced with carefree brilliance.

The sets for this "Onegin" were solid but unremarkable, but Elisabeth Dalton's costumes—especially the dramatic contrast between Onegin and the rest of the cast—and lighting (Steen Bjarke) worked terrifically to help set the story.

But the lasting star of this work is the late John Cranko. His brilliant vision for



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Pushkin's heart-rending story, choreographed with innovation and intelligence, ensures this "Onegin" will return to the stage many times.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Boston Ballet's "Eugene Onegin"

WHEN: Through March 6 **WHERE:** Boston Opera House, 539 Washington St., Boston

TICKETS: \$35-\$149



INFO: 617-695-6955, bostonballet.org

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