Stage review: Ballet West's 'Don Quixote' a vision

SALT LAKE CITY — It was the men who stole the show during the opening performance of Ballet West’s “Don Quixote” on Feb. 10. Checking every box on a classical lover’s wish list, the production exhibited challenging technique, playful theatrics and sumptuous sets and costumes. Unlike most classical ballets, however, the gentlemen were front and center.

When they weren’t defying gravity as matadors or gypsies, they were flamenco dancing in an all-male corps. When they weren’t spinning exhaustively or exhibiting lightning-fast footwork in a solo scene, they were dancing right alongside their female counterparts instead of behind them as mere support fixtures.

Ironically, only the ballet’s namesake fell short as a standout, b­­ut that had less to do with the dancer than with plot choices made by its original choreographer, Marius Petipa, more than 100 years ago.

A ballet originally created for Russian audiences, “Don Quixote” obliges the title character to play second fiddle to the entangled lovers Kitri and Basilio, a single tale plucked from many in Cervantes’ novel.

Central is their forbidden love, and the vision-filled, comedic man of La Mancha leads us to them, acting as their chivalrous protector and savior. Carrying his lance and donning his basin-turned-helmet, he looks the part, but his role is ambiguous and muddled. Ultimately, he seems more the observer than participant, and the novel more of a launchpad for a Spanish-flavored ballet than for an actual retelling of “Don Quixote.”

It may be a hard pill to swallow if you’re awaiting the enlightening character so central to the novel, but, as with so many classical ballets, tradition is king. On a quest to maintain the authenticity of the original ballet, Ballet West chose a staging stamped as a “true original.”

Artistic director Adam Sklute even called upon Russian-trained Anna-Marie Holmes to stage a true-to-its-roots “Don Quixote.” So while the characters and plot are loose and a little mindless (not likely to induce any shining epiphanies), they clear the way for plenty of dazzle, delight and to showcase talent.

And showcase it does.

Kuei-Hsien Chu, who danced as King of the Gypsies, was just one of many standouts. His long, powerful legs sliced the air during a series of leaps with such a flash of force as to reap audible gasps from the audience.

The flamenco performed by the men was an exciting dancing duel and obvious audience favorite, as was a comedic puppet show danced by Ballet West Academy children. Also delightful was Easton Smith, who hammed it up as the buffoonish Gamache.

Christopher Ruud, taking on the lead role as Basilio, was at the top of his game. Having watched this powerful dancer for more than a decade, I can say without reservation that Ruud has fine-tuned his craft. Every turn was crisp and every leap airy and controlled — a daunting task for someone of his muscular build.

The beautiful and feisty Beckanne Sisk, in what is certainly a breakout role in her career, danced the female lead as Kitri. With exceptional technical ability — tidy turns, breathtaking balance, impressive extension and gorgeous feet — it is a wonder that just a year ago she was an apprentice with the ballet.

Only a slightly lacking sense of artistry and musicality gave this away, especially when she danced a duet with long-time principal dancer Christianna Bennett as Queen of the Dryads, whose grace and ease of movement are timeworn friends.

During the third and final act, however, Sisk and Ruud’s pas de deux was heart-stopping. Virtually flawless in every way, it was as if by this point, in the steady arms of Ruud, Sisk’s jitters and tendency to rush ahead were eased.

The pair magnified the sensational and unique choreographic choices that have made Don Quixote a desirable part of the repertoires of many noteworthy companies. Let’s hope Ballet West makes it a regular part of theirs.

1. Notice how the author relates the dancers’ movement to the story development. *(“in the steady arms of Ruud, Sisk’s jitters and tendency to rush ahead were eased.”)* Give three of your own examples:

2. Identify 5 vivid adjectives that made the review engaging/clear to you: