

## Royal Winnipeg's New Story Ballet

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Story ballets may not be the bread and butter of creativity, but they are the bread and butter of most ballet company's bottom lines. On Saturday night I attended the world premiere of Royal Winnipeg Ballet's *Moulin Rouge* by Jorden Morris. The 4,845-seat theater at the Northrop Center at the University of Minnesota was practically sold out, jammed with an enthusiastic crowd that gave the dancers a standing ovation.

It's so refreshing to see a new full-length story ballet that isn't a remake of a Petipa classic. Stanton Welch's *Marie* and John Neumeier's *The Little Mermaid* are both high profile examples of recent new full-length classics. RWB itself premiered Morris' full-length *Peter Pan* last year. Who knows if these new narrative works will have the staying power of *Swan Lake*, but they do offer a more modern take and a chance for innovative choreography within a proven money-making structure.

I was told that before he began choreographing, Morris thoroughly studied la belle époque, the era in which the story is set. This research helped him choose a score made up of music (mostly) by Parisian composers who were popular during that era. I'm sure this attention to detail helps the ballet's wonderful overall feeling of turn-of-the-century Paris. Andrew Beck's fantastic sets that include a brick bridge and a lit up Eiffel Tower are also a huge help to that end.

However, the choice of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec as one of the main characters is a little odd, given that the 4'6" painter was disabled with abnormally short legs. Although Toulouse-Lautrec was a fixture of this time and place, it feels incredibly weird to turn him into a dancer.

Morris uses the sets quite well, taking advantage of staircases to create multiple levels of movement and fill out the space. Also impressive was his use of props, including top hats and rolling painters' easels that he skillfully integrated into the dancing, almost having the dancers ice skate onstage. Yet some sections of his choreography seem to be there just to take up space in the music. The evening could have benefited from being cut by about 20 minutes.

The dancers themselves were quite impressive. In the lead as Matthew, principal dancer Gael Lambiotte showed off an impressive, easy explosiveness to his jumps. Jo-Ann Sundermeier was intriguingly sensual and magnetic as a Green Fairy in absinthe-induced hallucinations. Jacelyn Lobay also had quite a feisty stage presence as one of the Cancan girls. I hope this company comes to New York soon so I can watch them again—whether in a story ballet or not.