



FINANCIAL TIMES

November 5, 2015 5:34 pm

Hagoromo, Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York — ‘Rich and seamless’

Apollinaire Scherr

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Wendy Whelan in 'Hagoromo'. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

Serendipitous encounters between magical creatures and bumbling humans run through the story ballet repertoire. So a contemporary dance-opera of *Hagoromo* featuring the divine New York City Ballet veteran Wendy Whelan makes perfect sense. In the 16th-century Noh original, an angel descends from the sky to retrieve her feathered robe (*hagoromo*) from the covetous fisherman who has found it. Here, Whelan is that angel.

The adaptation is not merely a vehicle for this unusually egoless ballerina, though. The director, David Michalek — perhaps best known for his huge slow-motion photo portraits of dance illuminati, if not for being Whelan’s husband — has seamlessly integrated the worlds of experimental music,

dance, theatre, opera, puppetry and fashion into a rich, sober whole, with the only unevenness in the collaborators' reshaping of Noh to modern western ends.

Sara Brown honours Noh minimalism with a three-sided box of a set in blond wood. Arrayed in fashion designer Dries Van Noten's peach, sand and sky-blue robes, five instrumentalists from the International Contemporary Ensemble, 20 girls from the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, and opera singers Katalin Károlyi and Peter Tantsits as the voices of the angel and fisherman are tiered above the stage, visible but unobtrusive.

Nathan Davis's score slides from reedy whispers and feedback caterwauls to the heavenly singing of Brendan Pelsue's evocative libretto, with these extremes of mortal and divine occasionally crushed gorgeously together. Like Noh masks, Chris Green's delicate puppets remind us of the filters of remembrance and ritual by which Noh proceeds, eschewing realism.

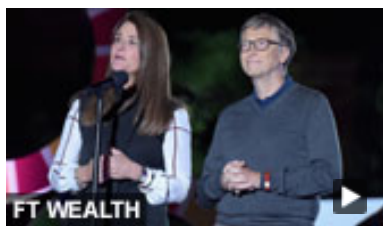
Only the choreography fails to balance the spirit of Noh with the performers' gifts. While Whelan's long-time partner, Samurai-handsome Jock Soto in his first outing since his NYCB retirement a decade ago, is allowed some latitude as the fisherman, David Neumann restricts Whelan to flat, hard, low, turned-in steps. This precise yet mysterious dancer can conjure a whole celestial realm by simply stretching her arms, as the many choreographers eager to work with her have noticed. Tamped-down, though, she is like an angel stripped of wings, kept from delivering the feather-light poignancy *Hagoromo* needs.



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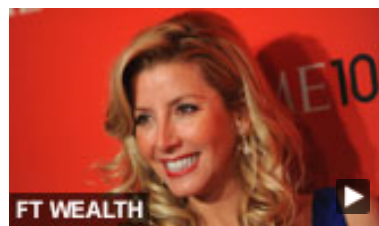
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