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Kallirhoe - A Triumph of Myth and Movement

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From the first beat of the music through to the final tableau, the Vienna State Ballet's staging of Kallirhoe is nothing short of a triumphant statement — a production that dazzles both the eye and the soul, and firmly announces the company as one of Europe's leading interpreters of contemporary story-ballet. That such a bold new work finds a home in Vienna, and in such an impeccably realised form!

Choreographed by the renowned Alexei Ratmansky, Kallirhoe draws on the ancient Greek romance of the same name, and through movement and music presents an epic saga of love, loss, jealousy and redemption. The Vienna State Ballet bring to it both the technical brilliance one expects of this company and — more importantly — an emotional and dramatic intensity that elevates the evening into something deeply memorable.

Visually the production is compelling: the sets and costumes evoke a mythical, timeless world, yet the choreography and dramatic shifts feel urgent and present. Ratmansky's movement language honours classical technique while infusing it with modern theatrical edges — expansive lifts, complex partnering, and fluid transitions between group dynamic and intimate duet. The dancers are uniformly excellent, but special mention must be made of the leads and the ensemble who sustain the momentum, clarity and dramatic flow.

Musically the choice of Aram Khachaturian's score is inspired: rich, sweeping and evocative, it gives the choreography a vibrant emotional underpinning. The pit orchestra responded with full conviction, their tonal range, colour and drive perfectly aligned with the stage action. The march rhythms, the lyrical interludes and the climactic surges were all realised with precision — at one moment the music whispered, in the next it thundered, reflecting the story's emotional arc. The result is a seamless fusion of dance, drama and orchestral nuance.

One of the most impressive aspects of this production is its pacing. Kallirhoe is not simply a display of virtuosic technique ("look at me" moments) but a well-constructed dramatic journey. The opening scene, with the chorus of women celebrating Aphrodite, was beautifully staged — the dancers moved with lightness and communal energy, establishing a tone of both grandeur and intimacy. From there the story unfolded: the entrance of the young athletes, the love-at-first-sight moment between Kallirhoe and Chaereas, the abduction, the journey, the trials and finally the resolution. At each turn the company

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maintained clarity of storytelling: even without words, one felt the narrative's emotional stakes.

I was particularly moved by the pas de deux of Kallirhoe and Chaereas. Their chemistry was palpable: the lifts and partnering were executed with a sense of trust and narrative-meaning, not merely bravura. The dancers allowed the stillness between the movement to breathe — a glance, a hesitation, a refusal. These human moments gave weight to what could otherwise have slid into spectacle alone. In the more dramatic sequences — when conflict, rage or sorrow intervened — the ensemble responded with fierce unity: the athletes, the chorus, the adversaries all moved with conviction, their bodies shaping the drama as much as their faces. Ratmansky's choreography demands emotional commitment, and the Vienna cast deliver.

On the production front, one of the strongest features was the lighting and stage design: transitions between scenes were smooth, scene changes unobtrusive but effective, and the use of space was intelligent. When the lovers are separated and journey begins, the lighting shifted to deep shadows and cold tones; when reconciliation emerged, warmth flooded the stage. The body of dancers on stage responded to these cues — the movement quality changed, the group dynamics shifted, and one could feel a real journey in real time.

Moreover, the ensemble work was impressive. In a story-ballet with many moving parts — chorus, group dances, solo moments — the company maintained ensemble cohesion without sacrificing individual brilliance. The corps de ballet moved as a unit when required, yet individual dancers emerged with clarity when called upon. The transitions between solos and ensembles were seamless, revealing a company in fine form. Indeed, one left with the sense that this was a "signature evening" for the Vienna State Ballet.
What makes this production all the more exciting is its positioning as a European premiere: Kallirhoe is new to European audiences in this mounting at Vienna, and the company embrace it with the confidence of seasoned performers.

That willingness to take on a new story-ballet gives the evening a freshness — one feels part of an artistic moment rather than simply witnessing a standard repertory work. For ballet lovers this adds an extra dimension: discovery, novelty and the promise of future evolution.
The thematic depth of the work also deserves note. Beneath the gorgeous movement and visual splendour, Kallirhoe asks serious questions about the nature of beauty, the power of love, the cruelty of jealousy, and the possibility of forgiveness. Ratmansky's choreography highlights these themes not by heavy moralising but by letting the movement speak and the dancers embody. The final reconciliation is earned, not contrived.

In conclusion: this production of Kallirhoe at the Vienna State Opera is a resounding success. It combines the best of contemporary story-ballet (via Ratmansky), the full strength of the Vienna State Ballet, and the tradition of the great Viennese stage. It is visually sumptuous, musically strong, emotionally rich and

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technically superb. For anyone who loves ballet, or wants to witness the emerging shape of major companies in the 21st-century repertory, this is an evening not to be missed. It fully merits its place as a flagship production of the 2025-26 season, and stands as a vivid demonstration that classical dance remains a living, evolving art.

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