Review

Star qualities

14/1/00

Ballet

ENB triple bill
COLISEUM

IN Tamara Rojo and Thomas Edur, English National Ballet has two incomparable dramatic dancers. Time and again their presence has lifted even a pedestrian programme into the memorable, but the triple bill that ended its UK tour with a Coliseum run is very far from pedestrian.

And the stars are only the icing on the cake. If ENB's constantly touring *corps* is inevitably less a Pavlova than a Victoria sponge, the women rose to *La Bayadère* with determination and looked delicious in their delicate veils. The ballet's "Kingdom of the Shades" act is one of Marius Petipa's masterpieces, sparely, elegantly staged by the ex-Kirov ballerina Natalia Makarova. In the hero's drugged dream, an eternal file of identical ballerinas processes through his mind, swaying in arabesque to Minkus's hypnotic music — a multiple reflection of his love in the mirror of his obsessed thoughts.

Ideally, one would like to see the vision, rather than the obedient technical exercise. ENB's varied ladies looked too nervous to be alluring, as if artistic director Derek Deane's stick might crack on to a wobbly leg at any moment. But I focused on the fragile, graceful Alice Crawford, and on the pure, airy classicism of the leading pair, Edur and Agnes Oaks, and I drank Petipa's potion and was duly narcotised.

Glen Tetley's *Sphinx* is a feat of erotic wrestling for three: the Sphinx; her custodian, the dog-god Anubis; and Oedipus, the man who solves her riddle, with a great deal of panting and slithering over each other.

I've never thought the steps equal to Martinů's anguished, sweeping music. Until now. Here were three Eastern Europeans with the technical finish to dignify the choreography. Edur's Oedipus was an epic, moving interpretation on Mukhamedovan lines, Dmitri Grudzyev's Anubis a dangerous, apocalyptic pimp, and bird-like, snake-like Daria Klimentova was tragic as well as mouthwatering as the Sphinx. Unforgettable.

And then MacMillan's 1962 *Rite of Spring*, to Stravinsky's masterpiece. At last the orchestra, under Martin West, sprang into life. Repeatedly MacMillan cracks open a bitter image for the stomping, springing human hordes: they form a human pyre, hands flaming; then a hideous, shuffling millipede; finally, flat on the ground, they scissor their limbs to conjure up a shaking, splitting earth as the Chosen Victim hops desperately through.

Rojo, so beautiful, so warm and yet childlike, is one of the deepest, subtlest actresses you will see, and with her blackened eyes and streaked, caked body, she died and seemed to take all hope with her.

Performances of ENB's Coppélia today and tomorrow. Tickets: 020 7632 8300. Telegraph Box Office: 0870 160 7000

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