Wackiness and tragedy

30/6/00

Dance

Four Saints in Three Acts
Dido and Aeneas
MARK MORRIS DANCE COMPANY, COLISEUM

THE American choreographer Mark Morris opens in London with an old masterpiece and . . . well, I'm not sure exactly how to describe *Four Saints in Three Acts*, his brand-new piece made with English National Opera. Nonsense opera? Considered silliness? Cute 'n' kitsch dance games?

There's something of all of those in his new staging of Virgil Thomson's wacky 1934 opera to a Gertrude Stein libretto of transcendent nonsensicality. Thomson (who died in 1989) said that he did not ask Stein what her words meant — one just didn't. So we have lines such as "Why when in can fairly rejoin place dismiss calls".

We have a theme of the lives of two (or perhaps more) Spanish saints: Teresa and Ignatius. We have music of shreds and patches, wheezy fairground accordions, splendid orchestral textures and rapidly abandoned tunes, with soloists both playing various saints and providing madly contradictory stage directions. We have an intensely bright *faux-naif* setting: vivid pinks and oranges, crayoned saints flying and dancers dressed like extras from *Carmen*.

The general effect is as vibrantly assorted and cosy as an American patchwork quilt, and it's the cosiness that strikes me most about Morris's dances. He places the singers rather beautifully (like saints themselves) in the golden niches either side of the Coliseum proscenium, which may not be good for the acoustic but looks ravishing and leaves the stage free for the dance.

The crowd dances have the most powerful personality, displaying some of the characteristic proletarian vigour of gesture and cherubic malice that we love Morris for. But the two central saints I found less communicative. Saint Teresa (Michelle Yard) wears an engagingly cheeky costume, but she's rather heavy on her feet, and John Heginbotham as Saint Ignatius is better at showing us an ordinary man who can dance (which is Morris's constant aim).

I was hugely entertained at several points but found the eclectic music and tongue-twisting libretto livelier and more unpredictable than the dance. Andrea Quinn of the Royal Ballet conducted a vividly articulated ENO performance, with particular bouquets to the chorus.

Feeling teased but underwhelmed put one in a perfect state to receive Morris's production of *Dido and Aeneas*. This 1989 setting of Purcell's short 1689 tragic opera is one of the most intensely realised, most startlingly moving theatre pieces I've ever seen. Morris's own performance as both Dido and the Sorceress who destroys her has become his most iconic role, with his long black ringlets, hooked Arabic profile and beefy male body delicately subverting one of the eternal female characters of myth.

Aeneas is also played by the role's originator, Guillermo Resto, his brown torso now almost as knotted as his greying dreadlocks. Age and weight here add a mystical power to the storytelling, a quality of something ancient and time-defying. The scenes for the witches are monstrously evil, the casual nastiness of their gestures opposing the thundering purity of Dido's huge hand splays.

Yet my most abiding image is of Morris, in Dido's final death lament, "When I am laid in earth", suddenly snatching his feet up from the ground in horror, realising what the earth is now to be. Of such minute, searing images is a masterwork made.

Until July 8. Tickets: 020 7632 8300

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