Athletic clarity is not enough

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Ballet

NYCB, Progs 2, 3
PLAYHOUSE

HALF the battle has been handsomely won — everyone is in love with George Balanchine, the genius of New York City Ballet. The other half is more dubious: convincing us that NYCB remains extraordinary after the death of its master.

On opening night, an A-list of artists and the quality of the works went some way to a clinching case. The following two programmes, though, raise questions. Questions about the judgment of Balanchine's successor as ballet-master in chief, Peter Martins. Questions not only about how NYCB performs the best choreography it will ever have, but also about how it is advancing.

What set NYCB apart from all other great companies of the world in Balanchine's lifetime was that it was constantly creating new works. Martins himself is now the chief producer of new work, and if the dead-from-the-neck-upwards *Fearful Symmetries* is the best he can offer, then NYCB is in trouble.

Martins artfully programmed his 1990 piece in a third bill of more old-fashioned Balanchine, and John Adams's forcefully throbbing score, given an intense workout by Andrea Quinn and the Royal Ballet Sinfonia, delighted. But the choreography is a dull, top-speed progression of clichéd pair-dancing, impotent speed without a flicker of inventiveness. In any company's repertory it would be a bore; in NYCB's it is a horrid anachronism.

Picture: PAUL KOLNIK

Balanchine's *Serenade*

This third programme was generally disappointing, apart from a luxuriously virtuosic and witty performance of *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux* by the ever marvellous Wendy Whelan with boyish Damian Woetzel.

Serenade brought up doubts about NYCB's sensitivity to the style of Balanchine's early works, when the dance surely relied on lyrical richness rather than simple athletic clarity. Older dancers get the point; not so Martins's younger favourites.

The second bill, with two triumphant masterpieces — *The Four Temperaments* and *Symphony in Three Movements* — should have been superlative, but it was not. A rather graceless account of *Concerto Barocco* opened, and the charming duet *Duo Concertant* (with delicious Yvonne Borree) was spoiled by effortful music-making on stage.

Symphony in Three Movements was a spectacular experience of martial speed and Stravinskian power. Whelan was its nerveless centre and young Tom Gold stood out among the men. But the performance of the matchless *Four Temperaments* crystallised my niggles.

Only the loose-limbed Albert Evans and explosive Kathleen Tracey shone among the principals, though there were bright sparks in the ensemble (tall Dana Hanson). But how can such a mind-stretching ballet not fire *all* its performers up to their expressive limits? This is the unanswered question about today's NYCB.

Until tomorrow. Tickets: 0131 473 2000

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