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Happy to please

Dance

Paul Taylor Dance Company
SADLER'S WELLS

LONG ago in the lore of modern dance, it became an unwritten rule that the pleasure principle was a temptation to be avoided. Martha Graham maintained that she put on stage what people went to the theatre to escape. Her declaration was spoken ironically, but perhaps it gave the wrong kind of encouragement to too many of her successors.

But then came Paul Taylor, who restored the pleasure principle. People who love the more mainstream types of dance need not feel cut off from contemporary dance by his work. The triple bill with which the venerable American returns to Britain, after almost a decade away, proves it.

Every part of Taylor's unusually wide range is here in this thoroughly pleasing evening — from the simple (and yet far from simple) musical interpretation of Bach in *Cascade*, made in 1999, to the wacky silent-movie-style *Sacre du printemps*, to the deceptive tango of *Piazzolla Caldera*

On the first night, everyone was talking about the bizarre *Sacre du printemps*, as people have ever since Taylor made it in 1981. Who would have thought that Stravinsky's jagged masterpiece about the renewal of the earth's fruitfulness by the blood of a sacrificial victim would spawn a vision more Groucho Marx than voodoo?

The subtitle is *The Rehearsal*, and so it is, with dancers eagerly drilling for a Cossack-hatted ballet mistress, and two pianists — Simon Crawford-Phillips and Philip Moore — brightly drumming out the score. Into the scene sneak a bunch of gangsters plotting a baby kidnap, complete with dumb cops and private eye.

The connections are there, somewhere. The exaggerated, flattened-sideways stomps obviously recall the Keystone Cops, but also the revolutionary dance language that Nijinsky devised for his notorious version in 1913, the one that caused a riot.

The riot here is of of loose ends and surreal visual jokes. I particularly cherish the confusion of the red-swaddled baby with a red handbag, kicked carelessly under the table. On the other hand, the music demands a grave response too, and Taylor gives the baby's mother, the tiny, brilliant Lisa Viola, sudden, excoriating solos that seem to tear grief out of the very earth.

The baby survives, but in the final, spine-chilling flutter of the music, the ballet mistress cruelly refuses to hand it back to the dancer. Balanchine would have approved, believing motherhood to be the ruin of a ballerina.

Taylor's bitter-edged humorousness is also woven through his 1997 piece *Piazzolla Caldera*, a commentary on tango's atmosphere of simultaneous sexual trade and fantasy. The night-club is red and low-lit, and the women wear incredibly louche outfits, with hold-up stockings under skimpy lace dresses; yet their dance with the handsome, smooth men seems, superficially, quite clean and cosy.

Beneath the surface, however, there is some darker probing going on, from the funny drunk male duet that turns from a lame mugging into a grope in the gutter, to the solo woman who's drunk on her deep, thigh-splaying ability to turn men into beasts. The more you think about Taylor's stuff, the more you see, and the more you may be disconcerted.

Until tomorrow. Tickets: 020 7863 8000

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