A wondrous beginning, an exhilarating end

Ismene Brown thrills to the Birmingham Royal Ballet at the Alexandra Theatre

By Ismene Brown

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GEORGE BALANCHINE described one of his loveliest lifts for a ballerina by a man as the moon passing through the clouds. This calmly soaring supported jump appears repeatedly in Concerto Barocco, his sublime dance to Bach's Double Violin Concerto.

In short white tunics, the female corps de ballet look like cupids, or clouds, or even trees and hedges beside the twisty road on which the ballerina must journey. The female formations eddy, chain and cluster, constantly redrawing the stage space. A second ballerina appears, mirroring the first as the second violin mirrors the first, gently commenting on the choices the prima ballerina is making in her route. The fact that she makes the most beautiful choices possible is a tribute to Balanchine's astonishing genius.

Any triple bill holding Concerto Barocco and Twyla Tharp's sporty In the Upper Room will start wondrously and close exhilaratingly, no matter what lies between them. In this case it was Powder commissioned in 1998 by David Bintley, director of Birmingham Royal Ballet, from an Australian choreographer, Stanton Welch.

One of Bintley's knacks is his sureness in mixing serious entertainment and populist trivia on the same bill. Powder is the trivia bit, saying something about safe sex, the enslavement of Nineties popular culture to youth, and classical music as aural wallpaper. So Welch takes Mozart's light-fingered Clarinet Concerto and places amorous young people in their undies in the forecourt of a museum.

The idea may be to prick the classical establishment's pomposity, but the poor men look

ridiculous in just their pants, and the women, in creamy bras and chiffon petticoats, simper and giggle and wiggle their hips. Great ballet teaches us about men and women, as well as about dance; this is Neighbours on pointe.

Some of the performances were exciting. In the Balanchine, the second ballerina, Nao Sakuma, danced with cleaner strength and more musical variety than the prima Leticia Muller, who has the habit of eliding one step into the next without articulating any. The Royal Ballet Sinfonia under Paul Murphy was thoroughly enjoyable in both Bach and Mozart.

In the Tharp piece, which packs Philip Glass's chugging taped score with a Billy Elliot stir-fry of boxing, jogging and ballet, it's the loose, whole-body movers who score. Carol-Ann Millar (blonde in sneakers) and Molly Smolen (redhead in red pointe shoes) stood out brilliantly - is it a coincidence that they are both, like Tharp, North Americans?

- Until Saturday. Tickets: 0870 607 7533. Tours to Sunderland and Plymouth

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