
Houston - we have a problem

Ismene Brown reviews a Mixed bill by the Houston Ballet, at Sadler's Wells

By Ismene Brown

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BY comparison with their unfortunate Cleopatra, Houston Ballet appear in a much better light in this triple bill. The dancers are shown as elegant, sprightly and fluent, in three contrasting modern ballets all less than six years old, even if once again there are questions concerning the choreographers.

What everyone went home talking about, though, was the odd one out - the classical showstopper of the Diana and Actaeon pas de deux, in which Carlos Acosta's athletic brilliance ignited 1,000 gasps in unison and spontaneous applause.

Acosta, Houston's star before he joined the Royal Ballet, partnered Lauren Anderson, a competent, wiry ballerina, though one lacking in airy uplift. Flashy numbers such as this (modified by many hands from its Petipa base) are an essential side of ballet, and Acosta sometimes sacrificed elegance for exhibitionism in his jumps - yet he contrives by personal wizardry to do vulgar things while remaining forever noble, gentle and superb.

More interesting for balletomanes was the fact that two of the three choreographers of the main works, Natalie Weir and Stanton Welch, are known favourites of the next Royal Ballet director, Ross Stretton (and fellow Australians). Most potentially distressing was that theirs were the weakest items.

The best of the night, and a pleasure to watch, was the opening ballet by a Kansas choreographer, Trey McIntyre. In *Second Before the Ground* (1995), he took a pretty score of African songs adapted for string quartet and drums, and made to it a flirting,

loving, modern-classical ensemble for couples that was choreographically bright and unaffectedly sincere. Enchanting little gestural details between lovers never rang false - rubbed noses, heads patted, pretend tiffs. It is a sweet piece.

Natalie Weir's lamenting lovers in *In a Whisper* were less persuasive. There is somewhere in choreography courses, I would guess from the frequency with which we see this sort of thing, a kit for making your own sub-Kylian ballet - Jiri Kylian being a guru to much of the world east of the Channel.

This kit decrees that you take a sad, slow movement from a chamber piece by Mozart,

Beethoven or Schubert (here the chill, desperate adagio from Schubert's String Quintet in C), dress the dancers in funereal clothes, and cast them in extravagant, clinging angst about something never shown. I'm afraid one longs to tell the man at the centre of this breast-beating vortex (Dominic Walsh is saddled with the role) to pull himself together, and Weir to think less synthetically.

After the weeping came boxing - Stanton Welch's Bruiser, a dance for trainee pugilists. In black gym shorts and T-shirts, with bruises painted under their eyes, the dancers jog, spar, feint and square up to each other, which is jolly en masse in the first section, but palls, because the dance vocabulary underneath is limited and repetitious.

Twyla Tharp is wittier with gesture, William Forsythe is more inquisitive about speed and balance, and Welch has not sufficient personality of his own to look like a contender who can punch his own weight.

- 'Cleopatra' until tomorrow. Tickets: 020 7863 8000

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