Arthur's quest for a lost plot

Ismene Brown reviews Arthur Part 1 and 2, by the Birmingham Royal Ballet, at Sadler's Wells

By Ismene Brown

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THESE days, to think new and big is rare in ballet. You have to admire the ambition of everyone involved in Birmingham Royal Ballet's Arthur epic - from its creators to its sponsors. Putting faith in a four-hour, two-evening ballet, especially for a regional city, is so commendable that I feel rather rotten for not having enjoyed it. Arthur Part 1 was unveiled to us a year ago. This week Part 2 has joined it, and the enterprise can be seen in its totality at Sadler's Wells.

In Russia they always cede proprietorship of a ballet to its composer - Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake or Stravinsky's Agon - with the choreographer's name in rather smaller letters. So I feel about Arthur, which should fairly be described as John McCabe's Arthur, designed and lit by Peter J Davison, Jasper Conran and Peter Mumford, with choreography by David Bintley, in that order.

But you can't put it that way, of course, because ballet is a theatrical experience and the crucial mind is the choreographer's. Bintley's finest talent, I think, is as an abstract classical choreographer. Despite his insistence on producing big narrative ballets at Birmingham, his dramatic sense has always seemed to me very suspect. In Arthur Part 1 - such a copious story, so many characters and events, ideas of both history and myth - he seemed to be running perpetually after a runaway horse, rather than riding it.

I had imagined that with Arthur Part 2 he would have tamed the horse. Its story structure looked easier to deal with than Part 1. Now Arthur is a mature king and his wife, Guinevere, and his best knight, Lancelot, are carelessly cuckolding him.

Meanwhile Merlin, the wizard who controlled the events of Part 1, has lost the plot, becoming seduced by the witchy Morgan Le Fay, Arthur's half-sister. Mordred, her son with Arthur - hence an incestuous, twisted bastard - is set on overthrowing his father/uncle and becoming king of Britain. There is less potential for confusion than in Part 1, and clearer opportunities to show the private feelings behind the public splendour of Camelot.

But Bintley does not do this. Events whistle by. Births, sword fights and violent deaths are given tediously close attention. The designs are quite magnificent, even heartstopping (Davison's apocalyptic closing scene, for example, is a sheer wonder).

But obvious moments when Bintley could freeze the action and let us inside the characters' hearts are continually passed over, even when some dance is being urged on by the colours and rhythms in McCabe's powerful - if over-extended - music.

Quick bursts of mime do duty for pivotal moments of emotional suspense that Kenneth MacMillan or Frederick Ashton would have seized on for choreography. Major characters walk about a lot. Minor characters get major dance slots. Death scenes of interchangeable knights in carrot wigs go on and on. Lancelot and Guinevere's love remains weakly undeveloped in their four pas de deux. BRB's best dancers, Robert Parker (Arthur and Mordred), Andrew Murphy (Lancelot) and Monica Zamora (Guinevere), are not stretched.

But still. Let us be thankful for the bigger picture, which is that there are serious composers and designers out there who can make ballet look and sound both modern and grand, and that there is still the will in Britain to go for a project like this.

I don't think Arthur is unrescuable. Studying how Verdi might have chosen his moments for arias, had he done this story as an opera, would be a valuable starting-point for Bintley to carry out some small but crucial revisions. Then we can all leave the theatre feeling uplifted, rather than deflated.

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