Dance to the magic of time

Ismene Brown reviews The Sleeping Beauty, performed by the Kirov Ballet, at Covent Garden

By Ismene Brown

15 June 2001 • 12:00am

THE Kirov's return this summer promises not only an enormously varied feast of ballet but longer and deeper thoughts about a revolution in style that now looks inevitable.

As last year, they have opened with their unspeakably magnificent The Sleeping Beauty - a recreation of the original Petipa production of 1890 for the Tsar. They will also show three 20th-century giants, Balanchine, MacMillan and Fokine, as well as jumping back to the 1850s for the exotic Le Corsaire.

These are all wayposts of classical ballet as different in style as Mozart, Verdi and Strauss in opera, but until recently ballet has tended to suck them all up in one all-purpose performing style. Now authenticity is fiercely guarded in staging the works of 20th-century choreographers, but there has been a much laxer view about 19th-century classics.

So there was some scoffing when the Kirov claimed to be restoring The Sleeping Beauty to its original form. For sure, one's fondest preconceptions are set on their ears by the production. It is long, stately and undramatic. This is not a romance but a royal pageant, with less dancing than we are used to and much more parading and mime. The ballet's conception, as a homage to Louis XIV and Versailles, anchors its music, its sights and its entire style. The humanity of Princess Aurora is subjected to her majesty.

The 1890 opulence looks very dated, and you might say it all reeks of mothballs (I heard indignant interval comments to that effect). But to me, what charm, what magic, what a sheer privilege to be timewarped into ballet history in this way.

Yes, it's a disappointment that the Prince is primarily a mime character, and yet there is something rather spicy and not un-modern about the sight of a technically astonishing and beautiful young Aurora being shown off by an admiring, supportive man in a suit.

And mime is not all dull and worthy - the single most precious benefit of this restoration is the heartbreaking Act 1 scene (usually edited) between the King and the knitters, where he wavers between his feelings as a father and as a divinely appointed ruler. Tchaikovsky's music here is more poignant than you could imagine, and Vladimir

Ponomarev's doleful performance cut to the quick.

As Aurora, Diana Vishneva strikes me as one of the greatest gifts Russia ever gave to ballet. She dazzled, she awed. Dark, young, smiling, she was a young Gloriana. Her Rose Adage with her four suitors was a test of their biddability as imperial consorts; her high modern leg lifts were a statement of her power. She ignored Tchaikovsky's phrasing, and yet inside that immaculate, jewel-bright technique Vishneva has a glowing grace all her own.

I could not love her, the way I loved Veronika Part, the rosy-cheeked, luscious-armed Lilac Fairy, or Daria Pavlenko's enchanting Florine, but in this production romantic notions are irrelevant. The Sleeping Beauty, we now see, is not a pure ballet but a display of the grandest entertainments that could be devised for the stage in one of the richest courts known to civilisation, and it sets a benchmark of absolute clarity.

- 'The Sleeping Beauty' will be danced again on June 27; the Kirov season ends on July 7. Tickets: 020 7304 4000