The Kirov's bazaar of swashbuckling fun

Ismene Brown savours a cutting edge 19th century theatrical spectacle

By Ismene Brown

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SHIPWRECKS! Pirates! Slavegirls! Fountains on stage! They weren't worried about high art in the days when Le Corsaire was made. Once the cutting edge of theatrical spectacle in 1856 (hydraulics were the new technology), Le Corsaire is nowadays a defiantly archaic old warhorse, and the Kirov, performing it with dead-straight aplomb, shows what a fabulous entertainment an old panto-ballet can be.

Derived from a swashbuckling poem by Byron, originally created in France before Russia leapt gratefully on it (and started adding and improving bits), Le Corsaire is more bazaar than ballet. Its story is a tangle of comic romance and abductions that allows two heroines, two heroes, three villains and various improbably marooned ethnic dancers to show their specialities on an idyllic Greek island setting to no coherent effect.

Think of Erroll Flynn as a pirate and Bob Hope as a Turk in a Busby Berkeley movie musical with gallons of gorgeous ballet girls and stage effects, and you have an inkling of what fun this all is. Five composers contributed tunes, best of all the tempestuous overture and Delibes's schmaltzy waltz for the "Animated Garden" scene (cue fountains and candy-pink tutus) in Act 3. Bad or good, conductor Boris Gruzin served all of it up like a banquet.

The most famous dance number comes in Act 2, a pas de trois for the main heroine, Medora, and two men, Conrad and Ali, better known in its gala form as a pas de deux, in which Ali, a bare-chested Turk, takes over Conrad's jumps. In the full version, you see that Ali is less a lover than the heroine's stylist, primping her up for Conrad, the main man. As payment, he gets bigger jumps than the hero. This is very mid-19th-century,

and quite spicy.

Farouk Ruzimatov remains today's nonpareil as Ali, his body like a brown whip, his hook-nosed face as withdrawn and proud as a desert chief. He is now 38 and has filed his extravagant youthful mannerisms away, distilling his exoticism with a sort of fierce austerity into a classical polish that can still show up many of his juniors. Young Ilya Kuznetsov as Conrad was a mere puppy by comparison, his yellow hair flopping excitedly, amiable but lacking leadership qualities.

Svetlana Zakharova was the most spectacular Medora imaginable, incredibly willowy of limb, looking in high spirits, and deploying her superlative technical feats in a context

where a bit of razzle-dazzle does no harm. The lyrical, brilliant Elvira Tarassova was a lovely Gulnara, the three Odalisques were outstanding, and Vladimir Ponomarev's shameless scene-stealing as the Sultan was a joy.

The Kirov technical training remains awesome to behold, the way it is fashioned to weave illusions into the physical trick. When the women jete en masse, they all cling to the air for a split second. It is one of the many wonders that watching this company offers.

- Kirov season until July 7 (020 7304 4000)

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