Fear, firecrackers and great jokes

Ismene Brown reviews Artifact performed by Ballett Frankfurt at Sadler's Wells

By Ismene Brown

05 November 2001 • 12:00am

YOU could smell the fear in the theatre foyer - the fear of being hopelessly confused. High-strung voices chattered brittly about William Forsythe being the "iconoclast of ballet", others excused their ignorance of modern dance. Determined intellectuals silently buried their heads in the unhelpful programme notes: "Artifact - a ballet in 4 parts, choreography, stage, lighting and costumes William Forsythe".

Apart from composer credits and date, 1984, that is all you have to arm yourself as you enter Forsythe's famously tortuous theatrical mind. This is a two-hour ballet with three principal characters (two speaking parts, one mime) and a corps de ballet. It sounds conventional enough, and indeed Forsythe intends to reinterpret ballet's earliest historical form, when it was formalised by Queen Catherine de Medici in 16th-century France.

Chief focus is a flirtatious, garrulous, imperious historical queen figure (Prue Lang), who sets the ballet going with a clap of her hands, but rapidly finds her control of events crumbling. Having invited us into her world (at repetitious length), and summoned the dancers for a firecracking display of Forsythean ballet pyrotechnics, she finds herself unaccountably eclipsed by the dancing plebs, and in the third act falls into royally funny screaming fits. Finally she accepts her equality to the other dancers.

On this framework Forsythe hangs associations of social revolutions, theatre's fantasy structure, memory's unreliability, as well as the intriguing democracy of the dance studio. There are confusing factors everywhere, though: a old man in modern clothes with a megaphone, and a ghostly dancer powdered as white as the moon. You have to not mind music at earsplitting levels, or the stage curtain thumping down in the middle of the action, or house lights going on unexpectedly.

Mere modern mannerisms? The lights business, yes, I think so, and Eva Crossman-Hecht's piano music in Parts I and IV is vicious on the ears. But the curtain's interventions feel rather magical, like the eyelid shutting on a memory. Also, Nathan Milstein's febrile recording of Bach's Chaconne in D when heard so loudly conjures up an almost physical sensation of horsehair grating on gut - the friction that produces not only the glory of the music but the dynamic presence of the human being working to make it happen. And that is the sensation that drives the awesome company dance that

accompanies the music in Part II.

This is ballet drawn in hard, sharp, fast, black strokes, as formally organised as a 19th-century corps de ballet and yet tipped with menacing extremeness. Dana Caspersen, a slip of a blonde, gave the central pas de deux a mercurial life, but overall the choreography is too calculated to be genuinely revealing.

The Royal Ballet's current Don Quixote shows the mannered, bloodless ritual that the court ballet had become by the mid 19th-century. Forsythe's ballet has more meat, more stimulating dance, no more plot confusion, no worse music, and much better jokes.

- Till next Sat. Tickets: 020 7863 8000

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