Down memory lane

Ismene Brown reviews Memories, a mixed bill performed by the Royal Ballet, at Covent Garden

Ismene Brown

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WHEN a woman remembers her girlhood - the sweet bird of youth, love's young dream, all that - we're on sticky ground. The new bill of one-act ballets at the Royal Ballet is a sentimentalist's delight, each one of the three concerned with a lady setting off down memory lane in rose-tinted spectacles. It is one of ballet's most worn cliches, providing a coyly chaste vision of twirly damsels and supportive men in large blouses.

With this programme, the new director Ross Stretton's vision begins to emerge, and it looks a bit luvvie-ish. There is a well-crafted, unremarkable Bach ballet that Stretton commissioned when directing Australian Ballet, from Stephen Baynes, and has now imported to London for no obvious reason. There is a nostalgic late work by the British exile Antony Tudor, The Leaves are Fading, to some of Dvorak's more sugary music. And there is Ashton's purple riot of tragic passion, Marguerite and Armand, once the exclusive property of Fonteyn and Nureyev, but recently dynamited into scalding new life by Sylvie Guillem and Paris Opera Ballet's Nicolas Le Riche.

It says something about the bill that Ashton's ballet provides the only salt, as well as the most choreographic inventiveness. Neither his nor Tudor's work is a major one, and Baynes's Beyond Bach is an apprentice work that has technical fluency but no real personality. So without any really great choreography on offer, we are left heavily dependent on the emotive theme. In the Baynes, which opens the night, this is a cosmetic device, with a woman in 18th-century dress in an opulent marble hall leading out a company of dancers in modern classical tunics and those benighted men's blouses, who dance formally to a patchwork of well-known Bach (Air on a G string, Sheep May Safely Graze).

Darcey Bussell and Jonathan Cope led the company in a state of sublime detachment from their undemanding material, with many beautiful right-angled arabesques, swinging their arms blandly and rather unspecifically, a disease of modern ballet. The piece is pretty to watch, but Baynes aspires to invoking the grandeur of Bach and Versailles. Well, prettiness is not enough.

The lovely Genesia Rosato is the reminiscing lady in The Leaves are Fading, thinking back to days when she was Alina Cojocaru in love with Johan Kobborg. The legend

about Tudor being a genius criminally neglected by Covent Garden is somewhat shaken by seeing this 1975 piece made for American Ballet Theatre when he was 66. Cojocaru and Kobborg, mercurial, delicate, mentally attuned, gave the best performance of its central pas de deux that I've seen, but even so the lack of conflict makes for only intermittently interesting choreography. Dvorak's violins whine melodiously on and on. The females are floaty and smilingly tear-stained, the males stick to them raptly; the four pas de deux are essentially hug-ins.

Thank goodness for the granite unlikeability of Le Riche's superb interpretation of Armand in Ashton's bodice-ripper, a sexy, difficult man at last. He and the brittle, needy Marguerite of Guillem make for a forcefully real and unstable couple, and they play their pas de deux with an edge of spontaneous combustion that's emotionally and physically startling. No rose-tinted spectacles for Ashton; he may have loved opulence and glamour, supplied in spades by Liszt's music and Beaton's designs, but he was never guilty of emotional humbug.

- Until Feb 9. Tickets: 020 7304 4000

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