This Giselle is back where she belongs

Ismene Brown reviews Giselle at Covent Garden

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WALKING through Covent Garden piazza as it thronged with people, many of them hardly realising that the Opera House was almost on top of them, I wondered whether an old ballet such as Giselle could ever touch them, its social setting and psychological imperatives so distant from our own.

To play it as a tragedy for today, with modern motivations (a girl's naivety, a man's

sexual urges), misses the point; the interpretations that touch me are not the most "modern" but the most in period, the ones that hauntingly spin the peculiar social atmospheres and supernatural beliefs of 1841, however implausible.

This is the strength of the Royal Ballet's production. Though it ratchets up the class-conflict angle with some vivid acting by the aristocratic party of which Albrecht, unbeknown to poor Giselle, is a member, it allows the modest beauty of this ballet to rest largely where it belongs - on its 19th-century choreography, and the skills of its leading performers.

With the current male shortage at Covent Garden, two of American Ballet Theatre's very interesting male leads are making their first attempts at Albrecht in this run. Ethan Stiefel, tall, gentle, cleanly classical, is paired with vibrant little brunette Leanne

Benjamin. Americans have too little experience of the class system, I reckon, to get Albrecht right - Stiefel is a prince in his body but, fatally, a democrat in his acting. An Albrecht without upper-class arrogance is one without much bite.

Benjamin is a good actress with a dazzling, lovable smile and a free way with her body. Yet I didn't get that frisson of horror when she was so casually broken by her deceiving lover. Partly this is because though she and Stiefel are fine classical dancers and actors, there needs to be something frayed and uncomfortable lurking at the edges - a glimpse of the fear of hell in the afterlife. In a great performance, you feel that you have been taken back to a world where such things happened that may not happen today.

The Spanish pair, Tamara Rojo and Angel Corella, made much more of that: Corella as smooth a Lothario as ever operated, and Rojo having all the frailty of spirit and warmth of heart that will make her his next conquest. Their acting was involving, the chemistry powerful, and there was something more.

Corella is, to be sure, a bit of a show-off, smiling as he carries off thrilling spins and eye-blurring entrechats (not always remembering there was music to dance to). But his dancing in the supernatural Act Two really did take Albrecht to the brink of exhaustion; his smile took on a hysterical look. Rojo, too, seemed to be dancing in another darker, slower world, drooping in hopelessness, smothered in the sense of the purgatory awaiting us all.

Zenaida Yanowsky as Myrtha, queen of the underworld, is vastly better at suggesting this black layer of super-existence than Jaimie Tapper, who looks ill-suited to Giselle's period.

Much of the imaginative power of this run is down to Emmanuel Plasson's conducting, which makes the Act Two Wilis scene into a symphonic poem of ethereality that the dancers are pushed to meet.

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