Comic-book Carmen saves show

Ismene Brown reviews Cross Cultures performed by the Royal Ballet, at Covent Garden

Ismene Brown

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THERE have been some considerable frocks on the stage at the Royal Ballet in modern times, but rarely so extraordinary a dress as that worn by Sylvie Guillem in Mats Ek's Carmen. It's a blinding confection in tinselly red, a Niagara of shiny sweetpaper frills, cut high over her knees but dropping behind in an eight-foot train, backless to boot, and with a matching headdress of Carmen Miranda proportions.

Inside this parody of a dress, the bony Guillem puffs on a tycoon-sized cigar - a razzle-dazzle of vulgar sexual signals, female, male, gargoyle.

I'm not sure whether Ek intended his 1992 modern dance version of Carmen to be quite as funny as the Royal Ballet made it on its company premiere; I'm not sure that Guillem herself did either. But she is such a natural comedian, and Ek's drama is so slapstick, and I suppose the British sense of humour so different from elsewhere, that the audience laughed heartily most of the time, instead of thinking about gender agendas, as instructed by the programme notes.

Ek is a controversial newcomer to Covent Garden, but I am all for him in moderation, since, though his dance style may be bizarrely gawky, he likes stories, and so do British audiences. Whether you are touched or not by his updated classics (Carmen and Giselle are his most famous), his ideas are provocative and make good theatre.

This is more than can be said for the rest of Cross Cultures, the third modern-ballet bill with which the new director Ross Stretton lays out his ambitions for the Royal Ballet's future. The Eighties slam-bam athleticism of William Forsythe's tights-splitting In the

Middle, Somewhat Elevated wears thinner on every viewing, and Nacho Duato's cod-Renaissance Por Vos Muero (For You I Die) is even flimsier, all reeling and writhing and fainting in coils, as emotionally incontinent as it is physically unimaginative.

Since Forsythe no longer shocks and Duato bores (and both appeared on last month's Enduring Images bill, too), by the second interval we badly need something argumentative, and Ek's Carmen is our girl. Everything about the piece is cartoon, from Marie-Louise Ekman's brilliant design to Rodion Shchedrin's broad-brush rewrite of Bizet's music. Spotted fans for walls, a rubber ball for a seat, women in frilled tinfoil dresses, men in black. They hurl themselves about like monkeys, shrieking. It lacks

only balloons with "Biff!!" and "Pow!!"

José (the excellently droopy Massimo Murru) is Laurel to Carmen's Hardy, a hangdog chap destined always to be flattened. He is minded by M, an alarmed, motherly person, eloquently performed by Zenaida Yanowsky. But the undoubted highlight is the arrival of Jonathan Cope as Escamillo, tremblingly masculine in copper Lurex from neck to ankle, out of whose flies Guillem pulls a long pink thing. A scarf. On a classier and more varied bill, this yah, boo, sucks addition to the repertoire would make a witty point.

- Until April 24. Tickets: 020 7304 4000

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