



Ashton's scintillating challenge

Ismene Brown reviews Triple Bill at the Royal Ballet in Covent Garden

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The world's ballet directors, meeting recently in Aldeburgh to discuss common concerns, concluded their conference with the useful statement that, while they had valuably shared common concerns, they also felt new value for their differences.

Then they visited Covent Garden for the new triple bill, which is an object lesson in the value of differences - Ashton, MacMillan, Jiri Kylian - and a night of fine music to boot.

Some of us in the first interval were proposing a new dream triple bill - Ashton's Scenes de Ballet, Ashton's Scenes de Ballet and Ashton's Scenes de Ballet. Eleven years is too long to wait for a home viewing of this scintillating 1948 masterwork, as clean and intoxicating as a vodka martini at a fantastical party.

No abstract ballet has so inviting a disguise: a surreal viaduct, men clad strangely in geometric tunics, and the corps de ballet women looking like Givenchy models in black hats and pearls, had been grafted on to the ice-blue tutus of Balanchine ballerinas.

Classicism, twisted, pervades Stravinsky's 1944 orchestral piece, somehow both warm and astringent. In parallel, Ashton's bold sureness takes the breath away, refracting 19th-century classical perfections through the prism of a burst of modernist curiosity, opening with a man's perfect fifth position, then setting a top-speed whirl of dance razor-angling in multiple layers through the whole depth of the stage, as if a

kaleidoscope had been set in your eye.

How good those Forties dancers must have been. Fonteyn's sultry introversion inside the bravura curlicues of her central role surely made a more fascinating effect than the young Alina Cojocaru now, whose mercurial body is delightful but who as yet lacks personality.

On the other hand, could Michael Somes have equalled the awesome Johan Kobborg? The Dane's artistry, timing and technical fire made miracles of choice dry wit, leading a sparkling company performance.

But when is the company going to do something about its hands, under Ashton the liveliest of instruments, but nowadays dead chunky, with one sticking-out finger?

MacMillan's Winter Dreams, following this, is for romantics; a slightly prolix distillation of Chekhov's Three Sisters pivoting on the married Masha's unhappy affair with a visiting soldier - Darcey Bussell and Irek Mukhamedov at its creation in 1992.

Bussell was back, gorgeous but rather maidenly and disconnected, with a less complex partner in Inaki Urlezaga. Supporting players kidnapped the drama, above all the mesmerising younger sister of Tamara Rojo and the the touching veteran Anthony Dowell, with some benefit to the ballet's weaker scenes.

When the lately departed Ross Stretton came up with this programme, he wanted the arrival of Jiri Kylian's Sinfonietta to get the headlines (Kylian long being ignored by Covent Garden).

Made in 1975 to Janacek's invigorating orchestral work - well played under the usually

