# Simply not sublime enough

Ismene Brown reviews Red Giselle at Sadler's Wells

**Ismene Brown**

12 February 2003 • 12:01am

The inimitable Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo traditionally warn their audience not to take flash photos during the performance, in case some of their more "fragile" ballerinas are deluded into memories of Bolshevik gunfire. How we laugh. But Boris Eifman's Red Giselle is about the real story of fragile ballerinas and Bolshevik gunfire, far from a laughing matter.

Eifman's 50-strong Ballet Theatre from St Petersburg is Russia's only internationally recognised modern ballet troupe - incredible, given that vast nation's devotion to ballet and its fecund artistic vision in so many arts in the past.

So in classic-bound Russia, he represents the new, both in "modernising" the ballet technique and in his desire to confront Russia's recent history, not least its ability to produce divine performing artists from the depths of murkiest historical events.

Olga Spessivtseva was one of these, a tall, skinny girl of unequalled sensitivity and technical brilliance. Nervier and shyer than her only peer, Anna Pavlova, she blazed in revolutionary St Petersburg, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and the Paris Opera Ballet.

Above all she was identified as the greatest of Giselles, and the madness of that unhappy character appears to have infected the dancer herself. She vanished into an American mental hospital for 20 years, then spent the remaining 30 years of her very long life in a retreat, dying in 1991.

Eifman, however, tells us a different story, one much nastier than an artist over-identifying with her role. He finds her the ultimate paradigm of the war between art and Soviet political cynicism, a war that (to him) art had to lose. In his most effective ensembles, Soviet secret agents haunt the ballet-girls' lives, turning them into performing robots.

Spessivtseva unwisely fell in love with one of these agents, and we know from many Soviet artists just how vilely invasive politics were in every corner of their existence. (Khrushchev said that he dreamed of swan-girls and Soviet tanks drilling together.)

Eifman's fervent sincerity has appeal, but his dramaturgy and high-octane musical fuel (Tchaikovsky and Schnittke) batter one about the head with all the discretion of a Ken

Russell film. Characters are ciphers: florid balletmaster; sinister but sexy agent; narcissistic, gay ballet star.

He whips up the scenes in a hurricane of dance styles and coups de theatre that veer from a pretty and lightly parodic Kirov classicism into Kylian-type expressionism. He fashions a surreal Giselle climax, but he cannot conjure what Spessivtseva actually was - a sublime artist who took real horrors and somehow transfigured them into glory.

Vera Arbuzova played her impossible role with sincerity: she has a beautiful neck and plastic upper body, and was effective in the monkey-puzzle "modern" duets. The men were handsome, the company stylish and communicative and costumes and sets effective. Maybe for Russians this kind of "truth-telling" restores their great artists to them; as an outsider, I found this production reductive and coarse, for all its peripheral interest.

- Red Giselle until Thursday; other programme Fri to Sat. Tickets: 020 7863 8000



## More stories