Darkness falls in the doll's house

Ismene Brown reviews Cinderella performed by the the Lyon Opera Ballet at Sadler's Wells

Ismene Brown
20 February 2003 • 12:01am

To set Cinderella in a doll's house, with the characters in shiny doll masks and with stuffed bodies, seems to me an inspired idea. This is what Maguy Marin did in 1985 for Lyon Opera Ballet, and the company has dined out on it ever since.

In fact, the conventional-sounding name for this new-wave company is a complete misnomer. Marin's Cinderella and Angelin Preljocaj's powerfully brutalist modern Romeo and Juliet (which they also commissioned, in 1990) are their equivalents of classics.

Cinderella lends itself very well to relocation in a child's land, where shadows are darkest black and full of fears, and to be cuddled and given a lollipop is the best reassurance in the world. Cinderella only wants her ugly sisters and stepmother to stop beating her, and to have friends and not be lonely. But making them into dolls opens all sorts of consequences, which are stimulating but also fatally limiting.

First, it is demanding on the audience; with masks on the performers, there is no room to fail - either the audience is drawn instantly into the imagined world by these unreal faces, or they absolutely cannot engage, and I suspect from comments afterwards that those who sat further away or upstairs enjoyed Marin's daring ideas better than those in the stalls.

I was one of the former, and I admired Marin's invention of a specific doll-body language, a sweet and strange form of movement that succeeds in revealing the essences of the characters despite the fixed expressions on the porcelain faces.

The ugly sisters and mother are padded into sumo mommas, their masks frozen in hideous, fat-faced scowls, grotesquely comic as they stomp about in a permanent squat. At one point, the stepmother sits on Cinderella to hide her from the Prince, and the girl vanishes under the wobbling spread of flesh.

But then there are the subtler derivations of movement that Marin has found: she clearly imagines the dolls made of different materials, the floppy sawdust limbs that Cinderella has (a lovely performance by Xenia Kastalskaya), and her longing to emulate the stiff arms and legs of the clockwork Prince - a tender metaphor for a soft-bodied girl who wants to be a ballerina. The seductive Spanish doll is clearly one of those rubberised modern dolls that you can bend about into impossible positions. There is great glee in Montserrat Casanova's wonderfully inventive designs: street life consists of dolls parading by with their own toys, and Cinderella's dream dress is a net of flashing red lights.

The trouble is that at some point must come Prokofiev's delectably lush, romantic waltzes, and all the good things suddenly become very serious disadvantages. Marin's troops of dolls can't break into great scoops and swirls of dancing, and their wooden knees-ups and jerky marches no longer look poignantly repressed but just plain inadequate. A curio, then, but an interesting one, if you sit at a distance and do not spoil your fun by reading the Pseuds-Corner programme notes.

your fun by reading the Pseuds' Corner programme notes.

- 'Cinderella' tonight; mixed programme tomorrow and Sat. Tickets: 020 7863 8000

More stories

More from The Telegraph