A procession of pain, poignancy and passion

Ismene Brown reviews Fuenteovejuna at Sadler's Wells

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Flamenco, that most solitary of dance forms, and a story about a communal Spanish uprising do not look like a marriage made in heaven. But, whenever an Antonio Gades production comes along, you should jump to see it. Because here is a man who passionately reconciles apparent incompatibilities into fine theatre.

Fuenteovejuna is, to be sure, a thunderingly good story for dance: a legendary event of dreadful, simple thrill. In the 15th century, the Andalusian village of Fuenteovejuna, under the yoke of a Spanish commander, mutinied when he raped a village girl on her wedding day in front of her bridegroom. Grabbing their farm implements, they did for the commander, and when ordered to name his murderer shouted with one voice, "Yo" ("I").

With its opposition of crowd and individuals, the lovers' sweetness and the governor's vicious possessiveness, timeless working solidarity and harsh aristocracy, the story lends itself to a great range of dancing, but also to a risk of stereotype. What's so enjoyable is how Gades, in this 1994 creation, having its British premiere by the excellent Spanish National Dance Company, turned flamenco's solipsism back to front. He delved back to medieval communal dances of curious details and patterns, which which plunge us into a period and yet deliver social subtexts that still resonate without false rhetoric.

The dance flows as freely out of everyday doings as water from a spring. The women

almost always have something in their arms: laundry, babies, baskets - take away the bundles, and there is the beautiful airy crook of the elbow of later flamenco. The men compete nose to nose, forcing their virility on to each other like rutting stags. The commander moves about with the highly stylised prance of a Spanish stallion.

Some of the suspense comes from Gades's mastery of timing: the village powerfully winnowing in a trance-like slowness; almost immobile stand-offs between angry men, in which 10-second glances with impassive faces can deliver an entire speech about churning thoughts, before their feet explode into action. The confrontations between the old village Mayor (Juan Mata) and the Commander (a ponytailed and rather over-vivid Francisco Velasco) have particular poignancy and complicated pride.

Among the medley of music, part live, part taped, are captivating juxtapositions - classic flamenco wailing next to equally hoarse rural pipe and drums from centuries earlier - but the intrusion of Mussorgsky's Catacombs to categorise the Commander is a lame application of "horrid music" that jars.

Not quite standing out from the well-disciplined company, Tamara Lopez's Laurencia has little to do but look gorgeous - her crimson and black wedding dress with sumptuous white lace veil is a dream. I longed for a young Gades as Frondoso, a dancer who could show a Hamlet-like range of pain, indecisiveness and heroic determination in his solos - although Christian Lozano is sympathetic and a strong, careful dancer, he too is not quite memorable. In the final triumphant procession Frondoso is no longer squiring his violated bride: that's a detail that, subtly, Gades would make you weep at.

- Until Sun. Tickets: 020 7863 8000