Proud to be a classicist

Ismene Brown reviews Ballet Out of Denmark at Queen Elizabeth Hall

Ismene Brown

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When classical ballet-dancers head off to make a programme of their own, they give a sudden view into how they see themselves. Many Royal Ballet men have done this recently: Irek Mukhamedov defined himself as an expressionist music-theatre performer, the Ballet Boyz went for modern macho, while this summer Carlos Acosta rooted himself in Cuba's streets - none celebrating classicism as their shaping force.

Not Johan Kobborg. His programme shows him a Danish classicist and proud of it. It must be said, first, that the Queen Elizabeth Hall is a rotten place to watch classical ballet. You are piled almost on top of the dancers, and classical ballet demands distance to mist up the lens and translate the exacting artificiality into theatrical poetry.

So I am not one to prefer seeing Kobborg and Alina Cojocaru close up. Even with two such accomplished dancers as these, sprinting through Lander's dizzyingly fast Festpolonaise, the nuts and bolts of classical technique are too visible; the tremors of ankle tendons, the white-knuckled grip and the glistening lip are interesting in a clinical way, but not enchanting. (The music recording seemed to be having first-night vapours, too.)

Still, Kobborg produced an enjoyable mixture of dances central to Danish ballet identity but rarely seen here - ancient and sunny, and modern and miserable, you might say.

Of course there is the Dane's old master, Auguste Bournonville, the Rossini of ballet, with his flirtations and folderols and beefy boys springing like champion fleas. The evening's talking point is the rare 1876 gem The Jockey Dance (From Siberia to

Moscow), with two cherry-and-white-striped jockeys (Ricardo Cervera and Bennet Gartside) prancing along the Thames in high gaiety - they presumably missed a turning somewhere around Omsk. The humour is uncannily English; it could be Ashton or Matthew Bourne.

But Bournonville pushed men into faster, nimbler and more intricate footwork than even Ashton could invent, while the women are most definitely girls - virgins but mistresses of flirtation, with the demureness of their hands quite cancelled by the eloquence of their eyes. The dances from Napoli which end the evening, fielding 10 dancers, admirably schooled by Kobborg, are quite amazingly sexy, filled with sociable

charm.

It's a world away from Flemming Flindt's The Lesson of 1964, one of those iconic ballets about ballet - Billy Elliott meets Psycho, perhaps - where a vile teacher murders his perky young student. It's crude by comparison with contemporary MacMillan, but I remember Rudolf Nureyev on his farewell tours giving it a desperate, perverted logic. Kobborg plays a little too loony to rescue it from Grand Guignol, despite Cojocaru, in her Lena Zavaroni bunches, being brilliantly irritating.

Cheers, though, for Kim Brandstrup's brand-new duet, Afsked, in which the glorious Zenaida Yanowsky parts with the most voluptuous grief from her lover Dylan Elmore. Romance, Brandstrup shows, in some richly fluid and exciting writing, is just as achievable in a modern idiom as in ballet.

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