A big blast of here and now

Ismene Brown reviews a mixed bill by the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden

Ismene Brown

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It's Lara Croft meets The Matrix, it's the world of today, and it's finally arrived at Covent Garden. The young choreographers have taken over the Opera House in this bold programme, and show in a blast of differences what they think and see. Ballet, for Russell Maliphant, Wayne McGregor, Mark Morris and William Tuckett, is not the literary romances and musical inspirations of the past.

This is a world of gyms, computer graphics and international travel. Nothing declares this more thrillingly than Maliphant's hair-raising Broken Fall for Sylvie Guillem and the Ballet Boyz.

Guillem's appearance alone - a dead ringer for the PlayStation heroine, in plait, shorts and knee-pads - is fairly knee-trembling. But her wiry wranglings with Michael Nunn and William Trevitt are enough to cause heart spasms, a writhing skein of superfit bodies that seem be challenging each other to utmost combat but are in fact peacefully, seamlessly entwining with unbelievable precision.

However, this marvel is blotted by Barry Adamson's dreadful soundtrack, a slapping down of electronics and gloopy echoes of Bach and Chopin, as sentimentalising and cheesy as the dance is austere and exacting.

Unmusicality proves depressingly pervasive among younger choreographers. Only Mark Morris's rewarding Gong enjoys finding a visual dialogue with its music, Colin McPhee's remarkable 1930s orientalist score. The dance is like a shop of Eastern artefacts, with 15 dancers in earrings and anklets doing odd Balinese squats among the skimming balletics. Allure from Deirdre Chapman, Alina Cojocaru, Thiago Soares, and almost violent introvertedness from Edward Watson.

But Morris, at 47, is older and more experienced an artist than the others. Their prime interests are obvious ones: fears about love, or extreme, mind-soothing athletics. William Tuckett's Proverb, a break-up drama for two, has Adam Cooper and Zenaida Yanowsky grieving over two single beds. Something's eating this couple, and the plaintively chanting voices of Steve Reich's music tell us it's more serious than that all the double rooms are taken.

The sincerity of the emoting by two gifted and honest performers isn't in doubt, but heart-felt isn't the same as art-felt. Tuckett can't push his dance language beyond two people's clinch into the imagery that affects us all - it doesn't quit being ordinary.

Wayne McGregor's interests could hardly be more different - futuristic life-forms, cool scientific manipulation of joints and angles. He treats ballet bodies as freak specimens, never more so than in this new Qualia, a fractured, brittle parade of dancers in spasmoid twitches, like frozen spiders defrosting.

Video images, walls of crackly electronic noise: the atmosphere is impenetrably inhuman as usual with McGregor, but the invention is scatty, despite the dancers' hurling eagerness for this broken-jointed movement, and a final illicitly emotional pas de deux for tiny Leanne Benjamin and Edward Watson only adds a question mark.

Overall, plenty to pick at and criticise, but nevertheless this is an evening that decisively alters the stakes. Let's all reflect: yet another stale Romeo and Juliet - or a night that shows what our kids are thinking?

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