Terrifyingly truthful

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Ismene Brown reviews Mayerling by the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden

On the face of it, Kenneth MacMillan's Mayerling is not attractive. How could a melodrama about a drug-addicted, syphilitic, sadistic and self-pitying man, surrounded by frigid or crazed women - even if based on real events - inspire a masterpiece in ballet?

Its programming straight after The Sleeping Beauty might be taken as an over-anxious statement about the Royal Ballet's range. But the juxtaposition is oddly enlightening: MacMillan was classicist to the core, and his 1978 ballet is revealed as a haunted sibling to Petipa's 1890 one.

Mayerling pictures the immoral, opulent court of 1880s Vienna, where the only priority is keeping the Austro-Hungarian imperial dynasty on track. Everyone is adulterous or on the make. Crown Prince Rudolf's parents, the Emperor and Empress, have public lovers but don't love or guide their son. Add in his foetid personality, and you ask yourself whether you could care less.

But, of course, you do, you stomach-churningly do, because of the shattering truth of its intimate scenes and MacMillan's brilliant story-teller's instincts as he builds the pictures of Rudolf's fatal life in breathtakingly inventive ballet.

Unlike his Manon and Romeo and Juliet, Mayerling is a work the Royal Ballet likes to keep to itself because of the committed ensemble playing such delicate, explosive material requires. Moreover, few companies in the world have even one man capable of the draining role of Crown Prince Rudolf.

In this revival, four will appear, headed by the quiet 41-year-old gentleman of English ballet, Jonathan Cope. There are better balletic actors than the tall, wiry, passive Cope. But in this part he manages more than anyone else to bury down past the sensationalist aspects to expose the piteousness of the misfit prince, and MacMillan's personal identification with him.

His tall, ageing body doesn't unfold the first solo with all the elasticity that yearns through it, but his lack of total control there turns out more touching, more human - an early glimpse of someone to pity rather than loathe.

Cope's transformation was due to his coaching by the fabulously daring Lynn Seymour, the original Mary Vetsera in Mayerling, and to his partner in the role now, the equally astonishing Tamara Rojo.

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As the crazed groupie who joins Rudolf in his grotesque suicidal ecstasy, Rojo makes the head swim to watch her, a little, black-haired, enchanting sensation-seeker, high on her hormones and avid for celebrity. She makes no excuses at all for Vetsera, and, as she coils herself lubriciously around Cope, you have to remind yourself that this is only ballet - because it so terrifyingly feels like ghastly reality.

But the evening's impact rested also on a network of well-pitched female performances. Against such a phenomenal voluptuary as Rojo's Vetsera, the business-like Mitzi of Deirdre Chapman and airheaded Countess Larisch of Jaimie Tapper made absolute psychological sense.

Against Cope's damaged Rudolf, Zenaida Yanowsky's haunting, frigid beauty as his mother and Gemma Bond's gawky whininess as his bride felt right. Different dynamics can also always be found in such roles, but no performance of this stupendous ballet that I've seen has given me such a tragically persuasive picture of what might have been.

Final thanks to the orchestra under Graham Bond, playing Liszt as if lashing horses through storms.

Until April 6. Tickets: 020 7304 4000

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