Stars shine for a genius

Ismene Brown reviews the Royal Ballet's Balanchine Tribute at Covent Garden

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Colossal and fascinating, the genius of George Balanchine is hailed worldwide, and worldwide are the celebrations of his centenary this year. But Britain always had an intriguingly sidelong relationship with the 20th century's greatest ballet choreographer.

No doubt this was because, in Frederick Ashton, we had Balanchine's only true rival, but also it's that Balanchine's penchant for storyless ballets, which illumined the abstract, streamlined glory of long-legged American women, didn't entirely appeal to drama-loving Britain, with its smaller, subtler, emotional dancers.

In fact, 20 Balanchine works have been taken into Royal or Birmingham Royal Ballet repertoire, and it is disappointing that the Royal Ballet looked to its store-cupboards rather than learning a new work for their tribute bill. (It would also be stimulating to have Balanchine and Ashton, 2004's two centenarians, together on a tribute bill or two.)

Still, with masterpieces such as Agon, The Prodigal Son and Symphony in C, this

programme captures the key aspects of his genius, and the company pays tribute with all stars on deck and a loving admiration only slightly marred by tight, inexpressive hands.

Most starry is The Prodigal Son, magnetically cast with Carlos Acosta and Sylvie Guillem. This is their first time dancing together, and must not be the last.

They make a wild couple: Acosta's innocence and adorable masculinity as the rebellious youth, clutching air with his huge, speaking hands, leaping like a tethered gazelle; Guillem's freezing insolence as the Siren who ruins him, poking her toes sharply into him, flipping her red cloak like a lash.

Their immediacy and sexual chemistry bring a remote biblical parable to startling life, stressing Balanchine's underindulged dramatic ability.

The Prodigal Son, his last ballet for Diaghilev in 1929, with a heavy folkloric Rouault design and theatrical Prokofiev score, has a respondingly thick choreographic texture loaded with powerful mime and bizarre animalistic movements. Yet nothing is tenderer than the final moment, as the Prodigal is cradled like a baby by his forgiving father. How did a 25-year-old think of this?

A more familiar image of Balanchine is his pellucid, open-air reinvention of classicism, such as in the heavenly Symphony in C, or the astounding acrobatic inquiry of Agon, his final collaboration with Stravinsky.

Agon here was superlatively led by the great Johan Kobborg, with stately Zenaida Yanowsky and Federico Bonelli taking on the eye-watering manipulations of the pas de deux with unusual intensity. If the company seemed to tire, they'd already transmitted their joy at dancing great choreography for us.

The most classical of the three, Symphony in C, should have come off most easily, given Alina Cojocaru and Tamara Rojo bounding with delight through Bizet's heartswelling

music. But weak casting at the core, its second movement, a rapturously beautiful ballerina reverie, broke the performance's back.

Lauren Cuthbertson is a lovely and promising junior but is as yet dancing under orders. Her most immediate task is to learn technically how to triumph over an inadequate partner like David Makhateli. Her next is to uncover her soul. Balanchine would expect no less.

- Until Feb 25. Tickets: 020 7304 4000

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