A masterpiece done magnificently

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Ismene Brown reviews Mayerling by the Royal Ballet, Covent Garden

This run of the Royal Ballet's Mayerling may be the most excitingly cast display that this superb ballet will ever have.

After some indolent showings recently in other MacMillans, the company is at its

world-beating best in this masterwork, all instincts switched fully on to the kind of dramatic transmission that is considered supremely "English".

It is the bait for which sunny classical boys like Johan Kobborg and Carlos Acosta crossed oceans. Who would have thought, when the Cuban Acosta debuted with the Royal Ballet in 1998 and the Danish Kobborg joined a year later, that that they would ever play the sick, damaged Hapsburg prince with such tearing credibility?

Following Jonathan Cope's astoundingly moving performance in the opening cast, Kobborg and Acosta are turning in magnificent interpretations of their own, each borne

on the company's mass commitment to find a powerfully personal way to lift the sordid facts into a man's bitter tragedy.

Kobborg's Rudolf scared me stiff. His fluid unfolding of the origami convolutions of the steps showed a man master of his own arrogant will, a study in distorted humanity. There is a terrifying intelligence in his interpretation: this Rudolf is driven by fatal loathing of his bullying father, the Emperor.

If Mayerling is to discharge its full moral burden, you need to feel the trigger for Rudolf's disintegration from self-pitying games into headlong destruction. The marvel is how great artists convincingly seize on different moments.

Where Cope is unmanned by the world's demands, Kobborg is discombobulated by his elusive mother, given vividly hypocritical and true emotional detail by the brilliant Genesia Rosato (though she is not matched by William Tuckett's playing of the Emperor).

The casting of the female satellites who dance their orbits of corrupting adoration around this spoiled man is crucial and fascinatingly variant. Kobborg is imperious, heedlessly abusing his women: Laura Morera's lonely, despairing Countess Larisch, Alina Cojocaru and Bethany Keating, two infatuated girls who offer him limitless ways of entwining young pliable limbs around a man.

Even at what he intended to be the climax of his life, when he shoots Cojocaru's misled Vetsera, Kobborg registers a ghastly ennui. Killing just didn't supply the buzz he expected. A performance dark as hell.

Acosta's debut as Rudolf was unnerving for quite different reasons. Such a vigorous dancer he is, so noble, so macho, all that blood pulsing through that superb body - how could he make me believe it was riddled with disease, physical and mental?

By the end, I was shaken. To see such a grand human specimen brought so nakedly low carried a resonance entirely Acosta's own, as if something mighty had fallen.

This impression was emphasised by the forceful playing of the women around him: the dominating Countess Larisch of Mara Galeazzi, Leanne Benjamin's dazzlingly randy little Vetsera, Laura Morera's sexy, deceptive Mitzi Caspar, Natasha Oughtred's demanding Princess Stephanie.

Under their powdered, needy tentacles, I think I heard Acosta's disintegrating Rudolf screaming: "I'm a man, get me out of here."

- Until April 6 and returning in June. Tickets: 020 7304 4000