Soaring to dance's highest planes

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Ismene Brown reviews Swan Lake at the Royal Opera House

The grand seriousness of Swan Lake is installed at Covent Garden for New Year, and despite its aggravatingly overdressed look - more baubles and ribbons than a Christmas tree - this 1987 production by Anthony Dowell, by restoring the original 1895 choreography, gives the ballet the tragic scope that Tchaikovsky intended.

People flock to Swan Lake not just for its haunting fusion of wild swans with enslaved women, but because in a world where moral absolutes keep shifting, this work of art represents a uniquely stern statement. No one can spin Siegfried out of his failure to keep his vow to Odette. There is more at stake here than two people in love: worlds fall on a broken word.

This enormous poetic vision demands interpreters without compromise, and in the three heavyweight opening casts, Tamara Rojo and Carlos Acosta soared with this ballet to its further planes.

The compact Rojo has a less bird-like physique than Zenaida Yanowsky and Alina Cojocaru - the albatross-limbed Yanowsky made a splendid flying entrance, while Cojocaru delicately fluttered on, the water drops almost visible on her.

But the double role of Odette-Odile is about more than costume and length of limb. Rojo has the superlative technique and poetic imagination to build a compelling picture of this eerie creature - bird, woman, queen and prisoner.

Her Odette was dignified and isolated, a queen fatalistically resigned to imprisonment, only to be heartrendingly broken down by Acosta's promise and betrayal. At all stages one felt how thin was the possibility of a happy ending between these two people - his simple conviction against her complex consciousness. Their final pas de deux was a last, private conversation before execution, its sadness overwhelming.

But Rojo also did something revelatory with her Odile. She was cute and sensationally alluring, of course, but she also hinted in her glazed eyes that this vamping doll might have her own tragedy as the evil magician Rothbart's creature - and Acosta responded to this implied vulnerability. Masters of all dance's skills, they ask human questions that cling in the mind for days.

Cojocaru and Kobborg's return to this ballet was of major interest, since their first attempt, two years ago, was a slightly overcalculated affair. Now they claim Swan Lake radiantly. Theirs is a more romantic alliance than Rojo and Acosta's - when they meet, they fit, they belong to each other, a natural law is asserted.

The sheer lilt of Kobborg's body and pinpoint niftiness of his feet lyrically enhance his powerful acting, while Cojocaru's Odette is exquisite, luminescent, tender and passionate - this wee body encompasses a vast ache of hope and pain as she beseechingly wheels in Siegfried's arms, supported by Valery Ovsyanikov's large-scale conducting. But her Odile, while all smiles and dazzles, isn't quite fascinating yet.

The tall Yanowsky has acquired the even taller Kenneth Greve from Denmark as a guest partner, the least satisfactory of the casts. Yanowsky, while having characterful moments, hasn't enough technical finesse or lyrical fantasy to let you forget that this role is too big for her, and Greve has sadly low jumps and a blandness that won't do in London.

- Until Jan 25; tickets 020 7304 4000.

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