# Risky, sexy – and afraid

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**Ismene Brown reviews Manon at Covent Garden**

How deliciously low Kenneth MacMillan's Manon is, to paraphrase Professor Higgins in My Fair Lady. A lustrous young maiden in corrupt 18th-century Paris leads a double life as a poor student's unspotted true love and as the diamond-studded courtesan of a rich

old patron.

This ambiguous working girl must end in the swamps, of course, but not before we have all whipped ourselves into a frenzy watching her deploy her style.

Although MacMillan's polished 1974 bodice-ripper seems to me a backward artistic step after the 1970 adventure of Anastasia, I surrender to its gripping theatricality. It's proof of a master creator that Manon is so rich a role that she resisted for so long being stamped with one definitive face in the army of ballerinas queuing up to play her.

Until, that is, the magnetic Parisienne Sylvie Guillem took up the role soon after she came to the Royal Ballet 16 years ago. Although she and MacMillan clashed over her wilfulness in this ballet, it was Guillem who for me gave Manon the epic French earthiness that home players such as Antoinette Sibley and Jennifer Penney had never quite nailed.

A few years ago her Manon was a stunning force of nature who reduced all the men around her to dazzled gropers. It was ideal, definitive. And yet, on her return to this favourite role, Guillem has clearly been asking herself questions; and she has plunged into a remarkable new reading, as sexy as before but now with an urgent sense of conscience, as if Guillem were challenging Manon to hold herself to account.

That matchless physical aplomb is still there, the ballerina's androgynous, whip-thin body somehow contriving to promise inexhaustible sensual delights, and her pas de deux with Jonathan Cope are transports of rapt love. After 15 years, their partnership has become amazing to watch, her Manon a flying arrow of risk and daring, his gentle Des Grieux catching her with safe hands but desperate for a quieter life.

However, the essence of Manon is the two grippingly explicit pas d'actions, a threesome between Manon, her pimping brother and the debauched Monsieur GM, involving an advanced case of foot fetishism, and the subsequent orgy where she is handled by eight men.

Guillem's body is all acquiescence, slipping pleasurably through those pawing hands, but flickers in her eyes and timing now expose a Manon who knows fear, weighing up the bargains she's striking even as she prepares another acrobatic freefall into some wealthy bloke's arms.

This opening cast (of three) is well knit, with an excellent debut as Manon's louche brother by young Thiago Soares, dark and edgy with wonderful dancing, and Anthony Dowell as the loathsome GM, a gross creature you wouldn't care to find stuck to your shoe. Top marks to conductor, Martin Yates, taking the orchestra through the splendidly purple Massenet medley score with surging immediacy.

- Until March 1. Tickets: 020 7304 4000