Doddery blunders and tenderness of Balanchine's daring confessional

Ismene Brown

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Ismene Brown reviews the Suzanne Farrell Ballet at the Edinburgh Playhouse

It is jolting to see someone step decisively out of the image you have of them. Balanchine's Don Quixote is a weird experience, sometimes dreadful, sometimes workmanlike, sometimes nail-bitingly daring - in no way a masterpiece, yet a piece made by a master in the grip of the strongest emotions of his life.

At some points during this resurrection of Balanchine's most controversial creation by the Suzanne Farrell Ballet, you think, how could this be so bad? The master choreographer is far away, trodden down by the leaden-footed dramatist. Stories were never Balanchine's strong point.

Unlike the fizzy 19th-century Petipa ballet that he knew as a dancer in St Petersburg, Balanchine's interpretation of Cervantes's novel homes in on the old knight, attempting an examination of his psychological state, enacting his dreams about women and religious redemption alongside his daily crusade to find villains to vanquish.

It is notoriously a confessional about the choreographer's own infatuation, at 61, with the 19-year-old Farrell. Yet the larger theme is an impotent protest at being old in a young world - fascinating, but not easy to portray in a medium in which classical feminine choreography is the primary palette.

Nor does it get help from the befuddlingly inconsequential score composed for Balanchine by Nicholas Nabokov (a magpie's nest of Hollywood schmaltz, cod-baroque

and Raveliana). And yet the music has its moments, and Balanchine liked it.

So one can only blame Balanchine for the critically lame Act 1. Or for the choreographic troughs in Act 2, whose court dances include "exotic" girlie diversions that look like something knocked up for Ben-Hur. The highly wrought Catholic imagery and the explicit humiliation heaped on Don Quixote are also difficult material for actors without supreme skills.

But then there are the brilliant, piercing scenes in which Balanchine's heart and eye suddenly cohere: Dulcinea's dashing solo in his Act 3 dream of her; the icy nastiness of the Ducal court in their stiff black velvets (excellent costumes, pure Velázquez, by Holly Hynes), and, most harrowing of all, the mortally injured Don Quixote being hounded into a pig's cage to get him off the streets.

I found the emotion in this blundering ballet, the distress, hope and love in it, a genuine redemption. It is uncomfortable to watch a doddery old man grovelling for a nubile child who can be the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and his dream date all at once. But it's daring, and those parts where emotion is highest are the most tenderly handled: she washing his feet, or blessing him gently. Still, I'm not sure this curious ballet could ever be pulled off convincingly, not even with more feathery feet, plastic torsos, enticing arms and responsive souls than Farrell's troops possess.

Heather Ogden is too upright and unmysterious for Dulcinea, and Momchil Mladenov provides a nice sketch of Don Quixote that badly needs filling in.

- Till tomorrow; tickets: 0131 524 3333