Bolshoi breathe new life into old Bolshevik warhorse

By **Ismene Brown**

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Ismene Brown reviews the Flames of Paris by the Bolshoi Ballet, Moscow

Alexei Ratmansky's scintillating, too-brief reign as the most adventurous and yet conservative (in the true sense of conserving) artistic director the Bolshoi Ballet has had for more than half a century comes to an end this winter. It has been five years full of fiery controversies, and Flames of Paris is the last big fire he leaves behind.

It is a not remotely slavish homage to a long-time Bolshoi landmark that rips out the old, simplistic heart and puts in a clear, intelligent brain instead. Vasily Vainonen's 1932 ballet was a Bolshevik landmark, too, a ballet as slogan, linking the French Revolution with the Soviet one.

Ratmansky took a risk of ambitious scale, turning a populist OTT pageant into a coolly clever balletic game, layering five centuries of music, story, symbolism and ballet technique together in a theatrical mille-feuille that includes some beloved Vainonen dances while being defiantly Ratmanskian.

For romantics, he's contrived two pairs of lovers, and for sceptics he's lightly objectified the Revolution with a quite different message: now it asks, what price revolution for the idealist when he loses his loved one?

Boris Asafiev's 1932 score (in a flowing new version by the next Bolshoi director, Yuri Burlaka) is a treasure, threading together 17th- and 18th-century French musical themes and references with considerable originality.

Drawing on Lully, Marin Marais and Gluck, among others, Asafiev's numbers are

alternately rip-roaring, fastidious and poignant, with a whiff of Adolphe Adams's Giselle.

Cheeringly, Ratmansky hasn't done the obvious with the music: peasants don't always rip and roar, courtiers don't always mince, and out of the musical retailoring emerges a more character-focused plot.

Jerome and Jeanne, peasant siblings in restive Marseilles, fall foul of the vicious local marquise, who succeeds only in bringing Jerome to his daughter's romantic attention and pushing Jeanne, after an attempted rape, into the furious arms of the local

revolutionary, Philippe.

These two couples, draped in French flags, ensure traditional pas de deux between the rowdy crowd set pieces, acrobatic and brilliant for Jeanne and Philippe, dainty and touching for Jerome and Adelina.

A long court divertissement at Versailles provides an "actress", her partner and a Cupid with three more antiquely styled roles of much inventiveness, costumed in fabulously rococo taste.

On the first night, the opening act felt old fashioned, with Soviet arm-waving and stiff, ungainly choreography in a stage sparsely decorated. But then Ratmansky's soufflé started rising, richer and richer in flavour, seasoned with pinches of Vainonen, aromas of Giselle and Don Quixote, garnished with balletic and political bonbons, and containing large servings of emotional and technical material for the Bolshoi dancers to have fun with.

The second time round, Flames of Paris seemed even more accomplished. This wasn't just due to the more youthful, vital and spontaneous playing of Natalia Osipova, Ivan Vasiliev, Viacheslav Lopatin and Anastasya Goryacheva.

No, I would storm the Bastille for first-cast Maria Alexandrova's magnetically heroic Jeanne any day, and her technical bravura is more sophisticated than young Osipova's. However, her men didn't quite match her for stylishness, and Ratmansky's tasty new dish deserves the height of style in every executant.

Next year Ratmansky sheds the directorship burden to concentrate on choreography for the Bolshoi, free from the constraints of the company's tortuous political past. Ironically, his monuments as director will be his dazzling rewrites of old Soviet warhorses, The Bright Stream and Flames of Paris, fashioning a new Bolshoi sensibility

with a momentum that the rest of the ballet world can only envy.

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