

Sections	Search
today	new music
opera	film
classical	theatre
comedy	dance
visual arts	tv
gaming	CD/DVDs
Books	

Search form

Search :

- today | new music | opera | film | classical | theatre | comedy | dance | visual arts | tv | gaming | cd/dvds | books

reviews | features | gallery | q & a | proms | first person | we recommend

Home » Dance » Manon, Royal Ballet

■ reviews, news & interviews

Manon, Royal Ballet

A sizzling last-minute pairing strikes new fire in the popular classic

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Thursday, 21 April 2011

[Share](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Email](#)



Manon, mais oui: Leanne Benjamin and Steven McRae, a sizzling new partnership

Images © Johan Persson/ROH

Manon, Manon, the little minx. Here she comes again - for the 223rd time, last night - and like the legendary ladies of her trade, scrubs up fresh and newly captivating, as if she'd only just skipped off the carriage from the convent. MacMillan's irresistible bad girl and her gullible, innocent lover have become two of the classic roles in all ballet since the 1974 premiere, when reception was far from friendly, and it's a sign of what a game-changer its choreographer Kenneth MacMillan was that when you go to *Manon*, what you come out talking about is how well the character drama

“She doesn't do the Marilyn Monroe-type sexbomb - Benjamin plays more of a young

the future of arts journalism

You can stop theartsdesk.com closing!

We urgently need financing to survive. Our fundraising drive has thus far raised £33,000 but we need to reach £100,000 or we will be forced to close. Please contribute here: <https://gofund.me/c3f6033d>

And if you can forward this information to anyone who might assist, we'd be grateful.



Subscribe to theartsdesk.com

Thank you for continuing to read our work on theartsdesk.com. For unlimited access to every article in its entirety, including our archive of more than 15,000 pieces, we're asking for £5 per month or £40 per year. We feel it's a very good deal, and hope you do too.

To take a subscription now [simply click here.](#)

And if you're looking for that extra gift for a friend or family member, why not treat them to a theartsdesk.com [gift subscription?](#)

more dance



'We are bowled over!' Thank you for your messages of love and support

Much-appreciated words of commendation from readers and the cultural community



The Nutcracker, English National Ballet, Coliseum review - a fresh look at a seasonal classic

On its second time out, ENB's production is a winner where it counts



The Red Shoes, Sadler's Wells review - once again, Matthew Bourne lights up the season

A strong revival for this stage adaptation of a British film classic



Rebirth: London City Ballet review - pocket-sized company fulfilling its big ambitions

Christopher Marmey's revitalised company gains momentum with each appearance



R:Evolution, English National Ballet, Sadler's Wells review - a vibrant survey of ballet in four acts

ENB set the bar high with this mixed bill, but they meet its challenges thrillingly



Like Water for Chocolate, Royal Ballet review - splendid dancing and sets, but there's too much plot

Christopher Wheeldon's version looks great but is too

was spun rather than a spiffing demonstration of ballet dancing. But last night we had both.

The latest run opened with a spectacular last-minute pairing, Leanne Benjamin and Steven McRae, caused by the injury of Benjamin's regular partner Edward Watson, and it's no disrespect whatever to Watson's outstanding talents if I say that McRae, who usually appears to have the greatest of confidence in his own abilities, became one of the most touching, urgently believable young Des Grieux I've ever seen, before the skilful wiles of fellow Australian Ms Benjamin. His first solo, where he introduces himself to the gorgeous young creature in the Parisian square, overflowed with sincere and ingenuous hope; his final moments were gaunt, desperate, undyingly loyal to his flighty Manon. And from the dancing point of view, McRae unfolded the character's beseeching, hopeful arabesques with an ease that cannot have come easily - this is a killer of a role, written on the abilities of Anthony Dowell who had a unique command of balance, and most Des Grieux wobble like jellies in those achingly slow solos.



“ This ballet contrives, like the great courtesan that Manon longs to be, to be available to so many individual imaginations ”

And it's no disrespect to Benjamin that in last night's show Des Grieux was the one I rooted for, felt most distressed for. In the age-old tale of romantic innocence and sexual corruption, Benjamin's Manon is an enchantingly cool hand from the moment she dashes on. Tiny, curly-haired, urchin-bodied, she reads the role exceptionally intelligently: she amused me

with her aplomb, and she gave a hauntingly broken death scene. She doesn't do the Marilyn Monroe-type sexbomb - Benjamin is more of a young Becky Sharp, knowing the moves required to make her way in the world, learned in all likelihood directly from her brother, Lescaut, who is a conman and a pimp who would sell his grandmother as well as his sister to make a few sous.

Becky Sharp, knowing the moves required ”

rating



related articles

Manon: Shock that turned to respect

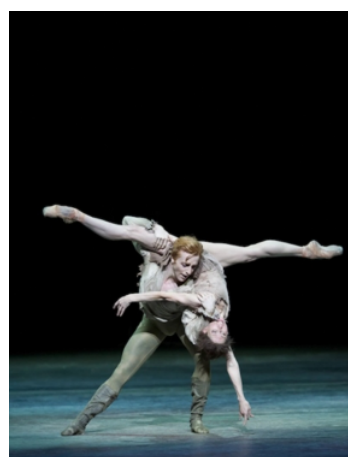
theartsdesk Q&A: Ballerina Leanne Benjamin

La Valse/ Invitus Invitum/ Winter Dreams/ Theme & Variations, Royal Ballet

explore topics

Reviews Dance
ballet Royal Ballet
France

share this article



It's the fatal depravity of the world that MacMillan's characters exist in which should come over much more strongly in the Royal Ballet's playing of the ballet, which needs a kick up the bustles. This story, after all, happens in stinking, dissipated 18th-century France, luxury at court, starvation in the streets. Though the rusty reds and poobrowns of the set and costumes from the original Nicholas Georgiadis designs make a powerful impression of decay and rot, key character-playing last night was inconsequential.

The figure who personifies the vice of Manon's world is Monsieur GM, the aristocratic

client who buys her, and who commands some almost pornographic dancing from her involving many men. Yet what does Christopher Saunders do? Instead of devouring her jealously with his eyes, checking that his expensive prize doesn't show any hint of interest elsewhere, Saunders wanders about the stage looking into the auditorium, stroking his chin with his usual all-purpose look of forgetful puzzlement, as if wondering where he left his keys. Avid, it is not.

And Ricardo Cervera as Manon's brother Lescaut is too clean and nice a boy to have the instincts of a sewer rat. If Lescaut and Monsieur GM are not reeking of corruption, we have no one to show us into this revolting world that Manon must make her perilous life decisions in.

There is, however, a new musical scoring which helps: the conductor Martin Yates has stripped down the old orchestration by Leighton Lucas and Hilda Court

muddling to connect with fully



iD-Reloaded, Cirque Éloize, Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury review - attitude, energy and invention
A riotous blend of urban dance music, hip hop and contemporary circus



How to be a Dancer in 72,000 Easy Lessons, Teac Damsa review - a riveting account of a life in dance
Michael Keegan-Dolan's unique hybrid of physical theatre and comic monologue



A Single Man, Linbury Theatre review - an anatomy of melancholy, with breaks in the clouds
Ed Watson and Jonathan Goddard are extraordinary in Jonathan Watkins' dance theatre adaptation of Isherwood's novel



Peaky Blinders: The Redemption of Thomas Shelby, Rambert, Sadler's Wells review - exciting dancing, if you can see it
Six TV series reduced to 100 minutes' dance time doesn't quite compute



Giselle, National Ballet of Japan review - return of a classic, refreshed and impeccably danced
First visit by Miyako Yoshida's company leaves you wanting more



Quadrophenia, Sadler's Wells review - missed opportunity to give new stage life to a Who classic
The brilliant cast need a tighter score and a stronger narrative

newsletter

Get a weekly digest of our critical highlights in your inbox each Thursday!


Simply enter your email address in the box below

Sign up for our newsletter

[View previous newsletters](#)

Follow @theartsdesk

Yates has stripped down the old orchestration by Leighton Lucas and Tilda Saari, clarified the wind, reduced the violins, beefed up the cellos, and generally made it all sound slightly more like music taking place in and around boudoirs and gambling joints than opera houses.

 [Listen to the theme of the first *pas de deux* in the new revision, the Finnish orchestra conducted in rehearsal by Martin Yates](#)

The cellos carry us more strongly into Des Grieux's sorrowing viewpoint, and Yates has underlined this by adding a poignant cello interlude in the last act between Manon's arrival off the convict ship in New Orleans and the fateful abuse scene with the gaoler. This gives a new poignant pause before Des Grieux crosses the point of no return by murdering the lusty gaoler (Gary Avis, always good value in the fellatio scene). I like the dramatic effect of this addition more than I like the impression my ears got in the death scene in the marshes of being at a West End musical, big trumpets, throbbing strings, too much blare to draw tears.



As casts go, this Benjamin-McRae one sets a magnificent bar for both dramatic acting and sizzling chemistry. Other pairings to come over the next six weeks have McRae with Roberta Marquez, Marianela Nuñez with Nehemiah Kish (debuting in the ballet), Sarah Lamb with Rupert Pennefather, Mara Galeazzi with David Makhately and the remarkable and familiar pairs, Alina Cojocaru with Johan Kobborg and Tamara Rojo with Carlos Acosta. Both of the last two couples are going to have to be at the top of their game to meet the dramatic veracity of last night's partnership, though. And it's a major tribute to MacMillan's theatrical genius that this pacy, rollicking ballet contrives, like the great courtesan that Manon longs to be, to be so available to so many individual imaginations.

- [The Royal Ballet's Manon](#) continues at the Royal Opera House until 4 June
- See [what's on at the Royal Ballet](#). Read [Royal Ballet reviews](#)

 **Add comment**

[Post a comment](#)