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Dark side of the fairy-tale

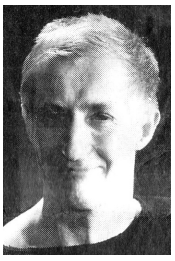

Photo Cullberg Ballet

Edinburgh frenzy is here again. Ismene Brown talks to choreographer Mats Ek

"It is the human situation that has made me hot"

THE heroine of *The Sleeping Beauty* as a drug addict - Giselle as a madwoman. Just how far can a ballet classic be pushed?

In the mind of Mats Ek, just as far as it takes to show that fairy-tales are not quaint, arty waxworks, but candles that an be relit to show the truth about our own times.

Ek is one of the small handful of major European dance-makers, the golden generation of Pina Bausch, Christopher Bruce and Jiri Kylian, and he is about to make his long overdue British debut as the featured choreographer at the Edinburgh Festival.

One would expect that famously adventurous audience to be delighted to make up for lost time. However, a fortnight before his company, the Cullberg Ballet, arrived, fewer than 200 tickets had been sold in advance.

Festival director Brian McMaster is bewildered by this. "Maybe we made a mistake in using the words 'radical' and 'groundbreaking' in our publicity," he worries. "Yet Ek's *Giselle* or *Sleeping Beauty* would speak so strongly to anyone who likes *Riverdance*. They are just deeper experiences. He is one of the great creators in dance, indeed in theatre, today."

Updating ballet classics is not new, of course; Matthew Bourne is famous for it. But Ek takes a less populist line, one more interested in the potential for fairy-tales to disturb.

For a rootler-about in dark corners, he is surprisingly reassuring in the flesh. Now 54, Scandinavian-blond, calm and quiet, he protests that his *Giselle* is not so radical: she is a peasant girl in love with the rich, urban man, just as in the original classic. His Princess Aurora is still rescued from sleep by a prince. They just make old points in new ways.

"When something is part of a culture, like a fairy-tale, it has a value of its own; you expect something from it. But only by keeping what people recognise can you deal deeply with it," Ek explains.

"All those tales are built up from a pattern: mostly the prince, the princess, the marriage, the happy ending, the good and the bad. But each variatn of this basic story has also some special, mystical point of its own.

"For me in *Giselle* it was the second act, the Wilis [undead girls], and in *The Sleeping Beauty* it was the sleep. What is this sleep of hers?

"Once I can find the door and open it, I can enter this house, which is the fairy-tale."

In *Giselle* (1982), his first reworked classic, Ek incarcerates the Wilis in a mental asylum. It is impossible not to recall with a jolt that not long ago some pregnant or violated girls would indeed be "sent to the bin" - and that recently Sweden confessed to having forcibly sterilised mental patients for decades.

Ek's new interpretation of *The Sleeping Beauty* (1996) has caused flutters because he makes Aurora a heroin addict. Rather a drastic change?

"I tried for a while," he says, "to approach *Sleeping Beauty* through the music. B

We all have free will - that is Ek's point. The "sleep" is that frightening abdication of will, the nightmare of modern times, when a loved child turns to drug dependency. Ek's Aurora does this out of desire for Carabosse (the traditional villain), here an attractive fellow addict. The Prince helps her to return to normality, but the focus is on the sleeping beauty awaking to her own power of choice.

Ek's scenario has a powerful moral plausibility about it. But what the audiences will expect is choreography strong enough to carry such narrative force - when modern ballet was invented effectively in order to reject it.

"Yes, I have tried to stop being so interested in stories," he says, "because in modern dance it was despised. The movement is the message - you know."

IN Britain we have always loved stories but maybe we are less keen on social messages, I say. "Social context is part of character," he replies. "Giselle is a peasant girl and Albrecht is a rich city boy. This is interesting whether you call it political or not.

"My earlier pieces were more 'political', a piece called *Soweto* in 1977, and *St George and the Dragon* (1976), my

second ballet, was a political statement about challenging the old culture - but it started in the bedroom. It was about me and my second wife and her husband. he was older, and I took her, and they divorced, and so forth.

"My entry to it is not political. It is the human situation that has made me hot."

Ek's second "wife", in fact his partner of 20 years, and mother of two of his three children, can be seen, unforgettably, interpreting his ballets on the Cullberg Ballet's videos. She is Ana Laguna, a bony Spanish woman who moves one moment with racking ugliness, the next with a heartstopping mercurial lightness. Her qualities - classically balletic but with an almost primitive emotional directness - have defined Ek's choreographic style.

The ballerina Sylvie Guillem has told me that Laguna is the dancer whom she admires above all, and when Ek created a duet for Guillem and his brother Niklas, *Smoke* (used in her television programme *Evidentia* in 1995, and to be seen on stage in the Ek triple bill in Edinburgh, retitled *Solo for Two*), the elegant Parisian seemed to be trying to infuse some of Laguna's beautiful awkwardness into her own highly tuned physique.

But as Ek points out, even for someone as quick-minded as Guillem it was a long process getting her out of classical mode and into his idiosyncratic style.

Ek did not train as a dancer until he was 27, and the Cullberg Ballet has always been Sweden's Rambert rather than its Royal Ballet. It was founded by E's mother, Birgit Cullberg, in 1967. She ran it until 1985, when her younger son took over; in 1993 he relinquished the directorship to concentrate on choreography.

He has been commissioned by the world's major companies; Paris Opera Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, Stuttgart Ballet, Netherlands Dance Theatre - but no British ones. This is probably because when Kenneth MacMillan was around we had more than enough disturbances emerging in ballet, and besides Ek, like Kylian and Bausch and Cunningham and other major creators of the world, needed a big stage and a goodly purse that until recently only Edinburgh could provide.

But Ek is here now. And there are plenty of tickets.

Festival tickets: 0131 473 2000