
Tradition bows brilliantly to the new

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Ismene Brown reviews the Kirov Ballet dancing Forsythe

William Forsythe's ballets sound like a toolshop, all clanks and rattles, with bits of Bach or Schubert blaring out of tinny speakers, half-heard, disregarded. His ballets look like a toolshop's products too, or those adverts in which cars rear up on their back wheels, fall apart and turn into prancing robots.

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So it was when the Kirov's Swan Queens, Juliets and princes came out with bare legs and tiny swimsuits, cracking their feet above their ears and snapping their groins almost inside-out. Since they began their discovery of Forsythe last year, debate has raged: should this great traditional company, with its dedication to classical harmony, be taking on this Dr Frankenstein?

I've no doubt that it should. I shared the great enthusiasm of the audiences for the Kirov's two all-Forsythe performances, as, for example, Daria Pavlenko, one of the most beautiful of Odettes, turned herself into a balletic boxer in a red leotard in *Steptext*, or Evgenia Obraztsova, a captivating medieval Juliet, proved just as young, fresh and delightful in the avant-garde *Approximate Sonata*.

Stories and music are of secondary interest to Forsythe because he is wholly inspired by today's dancers. He holds up, with a very engaging sense of wonder, their incredible elasticity, their explosive speed and precision on pointe, their cable strength; yet he's also curious about the age-old magic of how they switch on and off their personal electricity in performance.

Their marrow-deep training in grace makes the Kirov's way with Forsythe particularly intriguing. Two 1980s ballets, *Steptext* and *In the Middle*, are familiar from the Royal Ballet, pivoting on Sylvie Guillem's extravagantly mischievous physicality.

Pavlenko is more compactly built, and her air of soulful reluctance in the high kicks and aggressive manhandling by *Steptext*'s three men made the ballet a metaphor of culture clash - three new-world Forsytheans grasping for this old-world ballerina, who appeared to be debating the worth of each move as she did it. How interesting that Forsythe chose her as his protagonist.

Approximate Sonata, made 11 years later, is a series of four intricately varied pas de deux, to mournful chords struck on a beery piano. The charming Obraztsova, sensual Ekaterina Petina and formidably leggy Elena Vostrotina held the stage like a succession of fabulous young empresses, and it was almost shocking when the supporting lads stopped them to correct them.

Ever the showman, Forsythe created as its companion piece a pseudo-classical quintet to Schubert, *The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude*, a superficial and unmusical parody of Balanchine trying to use breakneck speed to hide its repetitive steps. For once, the Kirov's women looked hassled, but the two men, Leonid Sarafanov and even more Andrian Fadeyev, seem incapable of an unstylish step, even when given ungainly things to dance.

From the deafening guillotine crash that launches it, *In the Middle* ain't subtle but it sure is thrilling, half dance rehearsal, half performance, sensationally led by the spidery redhead Ekaterina Kondaurova and explosive, seductive little Irina Golub. Respect all round, to the Kirov and to Forsythe.

- Season ends Sat. Tickets: 020 7304 4000
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