

TO DT Arts Desk from Ismene Brown
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Review: 'Anastasia', Royal Ballet

Poor Anastasia, what a troubled and constantly pawed-about creature she. Not only the central real-life character of Kenneth MacMillan's most challenging full-length ballet, but even the work itself. His 1970 'Anastasia' (between 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Manon') grew, experimentally, out of a modernist one-act ballet set in an asylum, concerning an inmate, Anna Anderson, who believed herself to be Anastasia, Russia's last Romanov princess, thought shot by Bolsheviks. When MacMillan became Royal Ballet director, he added two preceding acts.

So this is not an organic narrative, but something more haphazard and subtle. The three acts are more like photographs that capture impressions and feelings - a soft-focus, gilded glow of lace and white suits for the privileged Imperial family, with Anastasia as a child in a big hat; a middle act of sharp-cut expressionistic luxury where the adolescent princess suffers her parents' infidelities while peasants riot outside the palace; finally the hallucinatory asylum conclusion with its hauntingly real newsfilm of the Romanovs.

Favourite MacMillan themes recur: the complicated pains of adultery, the vulnerability of institutional power, the way a person's fantasy can obliterate realities. I find the acts' disparate atmosphere and music (two Tchaikovsky symphonies preceding a Martinu symphony fused with electronic whispers) fascinating - they emphasise that the ballet is not about facts but fallible, skewed memory. Bob Crowley's sets zoom in exactly on this - remembered objects loom vast and off-kilter (the Royal yacht's funnel, the palace chandeliers) while chairs and wallpaper are blanked out.

Unhappily, changes were visible on opening night, both ethically and dramatically questionable. When MacMillan died in 1992, he had been having third thoughts about the ballet, and these have now been "realised" by his widow. What I saw calamitously weakened the middle act by removing its unifying thread - Anastasia's crucial psychological viewpoint. She no longer eavesdropped on the grown-ups' amours, no longer hooked our sympathies. Further, in the last act her relationship with Rasputin, the peasant mystic, had a distracting new sexual tint.

MacMillan apparently wanted to expand Rasputin for Irek Mukhamedov, his final muse, but can this tabloid titivating be right? Mukhamedov now certainly radiates a piercing charisma as Rasputin, unkempt, bearded, and handling the women with expert power. However, his pivotal relationship must be with the Tsarina (Genesia Rosato, marvellously gullible). There is no argument for making posthumous changes to works of art, even if they might strengthen it (where would it end?) - but this banal new shift tears apart the fragile pact of belief we want to make with Anna Anderson.

Leanne Benjamin made a beautifully childlike and natural young girl in Act 1; her role in Act 2 is so diminished that she starts Act 3's challenges without much of the emotional ballast that she needs to make us scream for her. The young men of Act 1 danced urgently and gracefully, and Miyako Yoshida and Johan Kobborg performed the dazzling Kschessinska pas de deux with finesse but not much hint that the ballerina was the Tsar's disruptive mistress. It would be dreadful to see 'Anastasia' forgotten, but this surgery surely hastens her end.

Till May 12; tickets 020 7304 4000

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