

Ashton's back in fashion - and his delicious dances are back in Swan Lake

ALTHOUGH I thought that the poetic masterpiece *Swan Lake* had been hard done by in English National Ballet's puffed-up arena production at the Albert Hall, ENB's director Derek Deane is to be congratulated on his new touring theatre production, which had its premiere at the Mayflower, Southampton.

Not only are there now splendidly calm designs by Peter Farmer, but also the choreography has been rethought to give us back the soulful experience. Deane can't resist creating an overture scene of Odette's capture by Rothbart, but otherwise he gives way politely to the masters.

Here are Ivanov's phenomenal swan scenes, and Petipa's

amorous national dances, only mildly tinkered with. And here, thank you, are Frederick Ashton's delicious dances for the court acts, rarely seen these days: the Act 1 waltz and his ebullient *pas de quatre*, and in Act 3 his lightning-footed Neapolitan Dance.

Finally, contradicting the arena version's facile "happy ending", Deane returns the grave, sad conclusion that Tchaikovsky clearly called for in his rapturous closing music. Sadly the musical experience was raw, as it often is with ENB's orchestra — not conductor Gavin Sutherland's fault, they just have too many bad players.

But as far as dance was concerned, ENB did well. The

Ballet

Swan Lake
ENGLISH NATIONAL BALLET, TOURING
Ashton bill
BIRMINGHAM ROYAL BALLET, TOURING

corps de ballet was clear and gentle (apart from the over-bold Princesses), Monica Perigo, a spirited, crisp-legged Italian whom I've always liked, was an eloquent Odette and a captivatingly voluptuous Odile. Patrick Armand as Siegfried did not seem to share my enthusiasm wholeheartedly.

Ashton is "in" this season, praise be. Birmingham Royal Ballet has brought back its two superb bills, performed briefly

last spring, showing his unmatched genius for ingenuity and surprises.

The big revelation is that *Dante Sonata*, his long-lost wartime ballet in bare feet, turns out to be the audience hit. Its resurrection earlier this year was thought a little dodgy. But in Plymouth's Theatre Royal, where the first programme opened, the audience applauded and applauded, as the Children of Light and Children of Darkness ended their war with the victims of both sides held aloft.

The forces of Light (read England and St George) have long, angelic hair and white nighties. Those of Darkness (Hitler) are half-naked, with

black serpents curling up their bodies. The style is a bit oratorical, a bit naive, tossed on Liszt's stormy music. All the same, you feel quakes of fear at Ashton's searing image-making, as he whips the bodies into hell-fires and snake-pits, and suddenly states his controversial, ambiguous conclusion.

If *Dante* appeals directly to the heart, *Scenes de Ballet* is a masterpiece of the senses and the mind. Why such a brilliant, dangerous work isn't constantly before us, as a matter of pride, I can't think. Never were there such chic ballerinas, in ice-blue tutus and black berets with pearl cockades, very Duchesse of Windsor. But this jewel-edged mystery and Stravinsky's

sophisticated music look too difficult for BRB's dancers, who need to sharpen up their feet and wits to match Ashton's alluring repartee.

Enigma Variations drew fine Elgarian music-making from the Royal Ballet Sinfonia under Barry Wordsworth (such a cut above the ENB lot), and frozen impassivity from most of the dancers, apart from the gently communicative Monica Zamora, who earlier shone intensely in *Dante Sonata*. She is the most charismatic artist at a BRB currently short of eloquent individuals.

Tickets: ENB 020 7581 1245; BRB 0121 622 2355

Ismene Brown