

## Daredevil elf is riveting

Ismene Brown reviews a mixed bill by the Arc Dance Company, touring

By **Ismene Brown**

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KIM BRANDSTRUP's Arc Dance Company all but folded last year, after the Arts Council decided to fund it no longer. It was a baffling decision that took the combined might of a high-powered petition of signatories - New York City Ballet director Peter Martins and pianist Murray Perahia among them - to re-establish Arc as an enduring landmark in British modern dance.

Arc has been relaunched with private money, which Brandstrup is spending (as before) on remarkable design and lighting values, and a bigger company - nine dancers here - in a fine new bill called *The Art of Storytelling*. I caught it at the New Victoria in Woking.

Brandstrup's three pieces, two old, one new, tell tales as widely ranging as a Mexican ghost story, a Russian love story, and *Orfeo*. The latter is a lyric, neo-baroque rendering of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice that has rightly become something of a classic for Brandstrup, now 45, while also pigeon-holing him as a maker of backward-looking work.

*Elegy*, his new work, will shatter that idea. It is a powerful trio distilled from Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, in which the Danish-born choreographer - whose Nordic style has sometimes looked too coolly discreet to carry the weight of emotion that he seeks - has broken through to a striking new articulacy.

An accordion wheezes through rain, and we see two drunks in a bleak bar. Low-lit by pendants, its panels look as solid as prison walls one moment, or become translucent,

allowing the men's dreams of love to be spied through them. One of the men, the remarkable Lee Boggess, is frustrated and angry; the other, Karl Sullivan, is tall, pallid and passive. They become rivals for the love of Joanne Fong, in one of the most riveting female performances that I've ever seen in modern dance.

A reckless, magical, oriental elf, she moves like lightning on to each man, captivating them both, burning them both. With Boggess she provocative, daredevil; from Sullivan she requires comfort and healing embraces. Everyone is damaged by the encounter. The great thing is that you feel all this clearly and truly through the choreography as well as through the perfect performances.

In 1995, Brandstrup headed south in his mind to Mexico to make Saints and Shadows, inspired by the Day of the Dead fiesta, and a chilling creation it still is. Hispanic heat is not his concern so much as the meeting point of Catholicism and voodoo superstition, where Christ's sacrifice and pagan murder merge.

A rickety ladder ascends into the ceiling, adorned with a straw twist - half crucifix, half totem pole - down which both Death (in a skull mask) and an angel (marvellous Kenneth Tharp) descend, and at which villagers cluster, sometimes in fear, sometimes in aspiration.

A drama unfolds in which a barman (yes, another bar - but Brandstrup comes from the land of lager) is murdered by his customers because the local hooker loves him. Brandstrup carries off the Christ/

Magdalene/Resurrection parallels with care and assurance, and the work is capable of satisfying analysis, though I have seen stronger interpretations of the barman and the hooker (whose choreography is too thin). Ian Dearden's music and Craig Givens and Tina MacHugh's designs are superb.

- Touring until June 28. Information: 020 7938 5828



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