



Long-forgotten classics revived by King Baryshnikov

Ismene Brown reviews the White Oak Dance Project at Sadler's Wells.

By Ismene Brown

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Like a troubadour who carries history's songs in his head, Mikhail Baryshnikov riffles through the pages of America's great modern dance history and brings to the stage dances that would otherwise lie under dust.

Renowned 30 years ago as the prince of Kirov Ballet defectors, he has evolved into the

king of modern dance, using his company, the White Oak Dance Project, to revive works by choreographers once important but largely lost.

Who in Britain had seen the Judson postmodern radicals of 1960s New York until Baryshnikov brought them to Edinburgh last year? Three dances by those radicals appear here on this delightful new White Oak programme. Who has heard of Erick Hawkins, except as Martha Graham's jealous and caddish husband? He is rediscovered here, in a glow.

Baryshnikov's lustre dominates the show from the start, with a 2001 solo by Lucinda Childs to the stately melancholy of a baroque Corelli largo in which the dancer seems to be dancing privately while making up his mind whether to perform to us or not.

He glances out into the stalls while making long, curved sweeps with those magnificent arms of his. You can see that Childs is in love with his arms. Most of us are.

This, and her 2002 creation for the company, the concluding Chacony, are friendly pieces, not radical. If Baryshnikov's solo seems to express his legendary stage fright, the other piece is a well-made joke about his inability to shake off celebrity.

The group dances to Britten's string quartets in sober, pellucid orbits around the magnet of centre-stage. No sooner does Baryshnikov slide discreetly among them than they vanish, leaving him lost and without a dance to do - he sees the public waiting, panic hits his face, the curtain falls, amusingly.

Between the Childs pieces come the best: two opposed views of the 1960s dance revolution. Yvonne Rainer's Trio A Pressured No. 3 is the radical article, running a string of ordinary moves forwards, backwards, and with odd interventions, such as having someone running around the performer trying to keep eye contact. Wacky and wonderful, especially when the runner in the second part is Baryshnikov, scampering around the imperturbably superb Raquel Aedo.

Best of all is the surprise of Hawkins's ravishing 1961 dance, the delicate, pale-blue quartet Early Floating. A rugged, vain man, who ordered psychoanalysts to make him a better choreographer than his wife, he is often ridiculed by the Martha Graham lobby.

There is, true, a preening quality about Early Floating, but it's a refreshing reminder that dancers once felt themselves to be out of the ordinary. Under an exquisite Miro-like mobile, three men and a woman in elegant black swimsuits move between statuesque nobility and a swimming lightness.

There is an exquisitely erotic encounter between the alabaster redhead Emily Coates and two men, Baryshnikov and big, handsome Roger C Jeffrey, who lightly brush their legs down hers, before she claims Jeffrey with a series of butterfly taps with her toe next to his foot. One wonders if Graham did that to Hawkins once.

- Until Sunday. Tickets: 020 7863 8000.



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