



A masterpiece magnificently done

Ismene Brown reviews Mayerling performed by the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden

Ismene Brown

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To be able to walk out of a drama about a rotten man's spiral into suicidal degradation with a sense of elation can only be because one has just experienced a theatrical masterpiece, the great soul and magnificent ambition of Kenneth MacMillan's Mayerling.

This ballet-dramatisation of the death of the last Habsburg prince in 1889 attempts to do more things than surely ever ballet has done, and pulls most of them off with brilliance.

Its revival at the Royal Ballet opened on the 10th anniversary of the night that MacMillan died backstage at Covent Garden, another opening night, another Mayerling, painful memories. Then, as now, we were watching an astounding performance in what may be the largest and most testing role in all ballet. Then it was Irek Mukhamedov; this time it was Johan Kobborg.

Crown Prince Rudolf's existence is, in a sense, the real life of those lost, idle princes of classical ballet. In Swan Lake, he drifts around sadly and hunts swans. In Mayerling, he screws around and takes drugs for the resultant syphilis.

In this marathon role, Rudolf has pas de deux with not one but six women, being a boy with a cold mother who seeks, first, mother substitutes in other women, then victims, then at last a death-mate.

It is lurid, but bruisingly pathetic, too. MacMillan is a moral man, who strains to dig behind the sensationalism to show the licentiousness of Rudolf's world, the habitual adultery of his parents, the personal cost and corrupting effect on true feeling. Some of this and the political subtext don't come off, but one can forget that for the sake of so much that is unforgettable.

Scene after scene tears the heart - that between son and mother in Act 1, more nakedly desperate than one can bear, she groomed never to touch him, he begging to be hugged.

His revenge on his unwanted young wife, battering her like a toy, and the descent into suicidal erotomania with Marie Vetsera, with guns and skulls as props, are horrible, believable scenes as drama, and also fabulous pieces of dance.

Mayerling is MacMillan's greatest three-act ballet, and he could make it only because he had such masterly protagonists and ingredients: acutely chosen music by Franz Liszt - played here with great care under Barry Wordsworth - the gas-lit luxuriousness of Nicholas Georgiadis's designs, and two original dancers who shared his truthfulness and passion for ballet's language, David Wall and Lynn Seymour.

They coached this cast, with tremendous results. Slight and gaunt-faced, Kobborg started anxiously but stitched together Rudolf's character with marvellous, unromantic honesty. Alina Cojocaru had much less to go on for Vetsera's character, but the combination of her social-climber's smile and that elastic little-girl's body gluing itself explicitly all over Kobborg added up to one of the scariest sights at Covent Garden for years.

Mara Galeazzi was immensely touching as Rudolf's former mistress Countess Larisch, the only one in this doomed world with a heart.

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