

Dancers' playtime

Ismene Brown reviews the English National Ballet at the Bristol Hippodrome

Ismene Brown

07 November 2003 • 12:01am



English National Ballet have the populist advertising all sewn up - TV programmes about steelworkers learning ballet, ballerinas stripping for lads' mags - and they have Barclays Theatre Awards for their programming. Now all they have to do is provide excellent dancing, but that isn't happening just yet.

The new season's mixed bill combines recently acquired ballets, of which the major event for the regional public is their first view of Michael Corder's golden-age-of-radio crowd-pleaser *Melody on the Move*. Its captivating design disguises the fact that it's a predictable entertainment, but this doesn't much matter when the orchestra is so lush and the jokes so well done.

You snuggle into your seat to the pick of 1930s-'50s ear candy, whipped up a treat on a Wagner-sized orchestra, as they used to in the England of the BBC Home Service. Out of a house-sized vintage radio, Simone Clarke, in a teensy little gingham tutu and big yellow Marigolds, delightedly pirouettes with her sister housewives to do the dusting, all swept off their feet by dreamy gentlemen in tails who bear carpet sweepers.

In the typing pool, the girls' flying fingers are synchronised, and the carriage-return's "ding!" is provided in the orchestra. A rhinestone couple dance a showy love duet. Corder's piece does what all good closers should do: it sends the audience out phoning their friends.

It was needed after the drabness of the preceding performances. Mark Morris's *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes* was such a coup for ENB to acquire last season that I was

surprised to see its 14th performance given such a cool flick-over by the cast. It's a gorgeous piano ballet - one pianist, a lot of notes, a lot of dancers (originally including Mikhail Baryshnikov), the whole effect angelic, airborne, dreamy and bucolic.

Pianist Jonathan Still plays Virgil Thomson's entertainingly eclectic piano studies on stage with affection and skill, while crisp and witty dance erupts round him, before he winds down with the beautiful *Drink to Me Only* theme and the dancers float sleepily away.

Why didn't it work that night? It had its first-choice cast, with such good performers as

Erina Takahashi, Jan-Erik Wikstrom and Emma Northmore. But, as a group, they looked workaday, muddying the curvature of the arms, and cumbersome feet trampled on the daisy steps.

The "rediscovery" of Prokofiev's "lost" 1924 ballet Trapeze this year was celebrated by Christopher Hampson's choreographing of this acidic little chamber suite for ENB. He seems to have been unsure whether to do a circus ballet as Prokofiev intended. There's a trapeze, and the six dancers appear to be trapeze couple, lion-tamer and chorines, but extreme emotions are weakly indicated, in sub-sub-Balanchine shrugs, moues, and stabby legs, and all is woefully under-designed in bleak leotards.

Note to choreographer: ballerinas in pointe shoes on trapezes are certainly dangerous looking, but not thrilling in quite the right way.

- Touring with 'Cinderella'; Bristol Hippodrome until tomorrow; Oxford, Nov 25-29. All tickets: 0870 160 2832

What did you think of this article?

Share your thoughts



Your feedback will be used in accordance with our [Privacy Policy](#).



More stories