

Spins within whorls within circles

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Ismene Brown reviews *Sleeping Beauty on Ice* at Birmingham Hippodrome

Sleeping Beauty on Ice's nationwide tour has launched to almost sell-out audiences, and critics are about as significant to it as gnats to a rhino. The magic word here is "ice". People just love watching skating, and *Sleeping Beauty on Wood* (ie, the ballet version) can only dream of such box-office appeal.

The Imperial Ice Stars are a troupe of Russian skaters who can allegedly boast 23 Olympic (another magic word), world, European and national championship skaters among them, all now deploying their skills in the cause of art.

As someone who requires Alan Weeks to tell me when it's a double axel or a triple salchow, I find the concept of "Olympic" skating in a "ballet" on a "rink" in a theatre rather too many as-ifs to take in at once.

However, there's little doubt that the Russians have turned the skating ballet into an aesthetic all its own. The sets are children's picture book with lots of gold and glittery bits; the costumes are a dressmaking mother's orgy of shreds of flying nylon; avalanches of dry ice bury the stalls. It is emphatically not a panto and all the skaters are terribly serious.

Princess Aurora is the German Olympic bronze medallist Mandy Woetzel, who is tiny and sportively built, with no neck and a Barbie-blond wig. She is required to wear a puff-sleeved pink dress that would be suitable for a four-year-old but is symptomatic of some deep disturbance in a 20-year-old.

On Birmingham's opening night she failed to land all her spins perfectly and was upstaged by the balletic Lilac Fairy (Olga Sharutenko) and gargoyle Carabosse (Maria Borovikova), and altogether obliterated by Catalabutte, the flunkey, a bravura skating role in skintight turquoise for Anton Kylov.

There is not a lot of characterisation. Prince Desire (Vadim Yarkov) is a dab hand at pushing girls into the air by their stomachs and spinning them very fast like plates. Woetzel's Aurora is half his height, and their duet looks like Fred Astaire twirling his umbrella.

The King is a fat, mincing fellow with two fluffy handbags and a wonky hat, who approaches the ice with the grace of Neil Armstrong stepping on to the Moon. He and Catalabutte rhubarb together at the back, shamelessly scene-stealing when the corps are on.

Yet paradoxically, the corps de patinage can be more interesting than the soloists. Six couples skating in unison are denied solo tricks and have to strain for elegance. The patterns on the ice have a Spirograph quality to them, spins within whorls within circles, delivered at a constant, mesmerising 40 kilometres per hour.

The music is patched together from at least two different recordings, including interpolations from Tchaikovsky's Pathétique Symphony, most remarkably for a gorbimey scene for insects and butterflies (with bobbles on their heads and purple and lime flares), starring the extraordinary stilt-skater Yulia Krasinskaya. Teetering on six-foot legs, she hoists her limbs up skyward like a regular Sylvie Guillem, or an irregular one; she even spins on stilts, a feat so ingenious that only the Russians could have devised it.

- Birmingham Hippodrome to Sat; then nationwide to May 14.

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