



Genius of infinite wit and wonder

Ismene Brown



As the Frederick Ashton centenary season comes to an end, Ismene Brown assesses his brilliance

A century of Frederick Ashton is winding down. Tonight the Birmingham Royal Ballet complete their tribute to the choreographer's centenary by performing his own favourite of his ballets, *Scènes de ballet*, and the Royal Ballet spends its final week performing *Symphonic Variations* and *A Month in the Country*.

During the Ashton 100 season, along with Scottish Ballet, British companies have performed 23 ballets and excerpts, while overseas American, Russian, French and Asian companies have joyfully learnt ballets often described as "typically" English - forever burying the myth found readily expressed at the Royal Ballet only 10 years ago that Ashton was parochial and out-of-date.

No one, surely, would have been more surprised than Ashton himself. He was terrified of foreign opinion - he worried that outsiders considered his ballets "English goo". As for posterity, his opinion was to the point: "F*** posterity."

But 100 years after his birth in the Ecuadorian port of Guayaquil and 17 years after his death, reviews from other countries have gone wild for his musical felicities, emotional subtleties and technical impossibilities. Perhaps after a generation of ballets of sensational athleticism and laconic modern sexuality, the world needed his tenderness and stylish nuance again.

But what is an Ashton ballet? The more you think of his range, from classical magnificence to dancing chickens, the more impossible it seems to fit any template to his imagination. Yes, one may savour an impression that where, say, Kenneth MacMillan's ballets are about real-life girls and boys, Ashton's are about the fantasy of being a woman. Here are fabulous, mysterious beauties in dazzling gowns; sprinkled about are the tell-tale women of dual sexuality who give clues to Ashton's own nature.

But then would one expect the paternal kindness with which he characterises the stunted young Alain in *La Fille mal gardée* or the sympathy he brings to Mr and Mrs Elgar? How, after the minimalism of *Monotones*, can one be prepared for *Jemima Puddle-duck*? Is the quintessential Ashton ballet a bisexual hedgehog in a Cecil Beaton gown, dreaming of floating like mist with a hunk in a toga whose mind is on his latest symphony?

Perhaps not. But it may be his bewildering variety that nudges a consensus that the "Desert Island" top spot goes to one of his purest, most abstract ballets, *Symphonic Variations*. Ashton himself said the one he'd save in a flood was *Scènes de ballet*. What a hard choice: the latter throwing up chic, strange cocktail perfumes, the former serenely clearing away the fog of the Second World War. Personally, I swing regularly between those two and the astounding character-ballet *Enigma Variations* (performed in both Covent Garden and, particularly well, Birmingham this season). But you wouldn't be quick to assume that all three were by the same hand.

Hence the dilemma of that dread phrase, "Ashton style", which I once assumed meant something posh and stiff. This season a generation of dancers never brought up in his ways have performed a large range of his ballets. They respond to him not from patriotic duty but simply for the expressive load and inventive challenge of his choreography.

If anything is proved by this season's retrospective, it is that, far from being a reserved English gent, he was a master of illusions and disguises. It's been noticeable that several natively trained dancers looked destabilised by his work. Many kindred spirits have turned up among Spaniards and South Americans. Ashton was raised in Peru and spoke Spanish fluently; one wonders if some thread still tugs.

Lynn Seymour, the (Canadian) original ballerina of *The Two Pigeons* and *A Month in the Country*, describes dancing his wriggling, unorthodox choreography: "Fred would throw you into this cold plunge-pool of physical impossibility and see what came out at the other end. It was scary to do, you need huge courage."

Courage, surely, is the nub of this genius. That Ashton was a creator of infinite variety is partly owed to his impatience, but also to the backing he got from Marie Rambert, Ninette de Valois, Constant Lambert and his associates in the establishment who believed in exploiting ballet's capacity to conjure the fabulous into ordinary lives.

People need witty entertainment to take their minds off miseries - they got them from Ashton. People need hymns of hope - they got them. People need dances of love - they got them. Perish the thought, people even need dancing animals - and boy, did they get them too. This season, I am certain, has awoken the hearts of ballet-goers who never thought they'd like Ashton: as they emerged from *Enigma Variations* and *La Fille mal gardée* and *Symphonic Variations* and *Façade*, they realised they were in love.

- Birmingham Royal Ballet dances 'Scènes de ballet', Birmingham Hippodrome (0870 730 1234), today.
- The Royal Ballet dances 'Symphonic Variations' and 'A Month in the Country', Tues, Fri, next Sat (020 7304 4000).

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