



Jolly iaunts with a genius

By **Ismene Brown**

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Ismene Brown reviews the Royal Danish Ballet at Sadler's Wells

History is fascinating when it makes the future come alive, but in ballet the past is a tricky place to revisit.

August Bournonville's imagination is where the classical ballet began its extraordinary transformation from courtly dance to engine of tall tales and superhuman physical illusions, and his sophisticated ballets and the beautiful, strong technical base he laid early in the 19th century give him the place of ballet's father figure.

However, only in his native Copenhagen are Bournonville's ballets now seen, hence the rush of interest in the Royal Danish Ballet's rare visit.

It is not easy to look so far backwards; ballet's development lay ahead, its technical possibilities to be extended along with the immense enrichment of its music.

Bournonville's ballets were about day-to-day love, when a boy took a girl's hand to claim her affections, and when a girl would hit an arabesque on pointe and then seductively tilt her head through her arms to look at him, yielding her foot softly into the ground.

From these instinctive signals of flirtation Bournonville codified some of the prettiest grace notes of ballet, and, if Frederick Ashton charms us today, much of his vocabulary was given him by the Frenchman in Denmark.

The programme of six excerpts shows a most enjoyable world traveller's view, reflecting Italy's warmth in Flower Festival in Genzano and Napoli (backcloth of a smouldering Vesuvius), his native Paris in Le Conservatoire, misty Scotland in La Sylphide and intimations of Royal Ascot in the very diverting Jockey Dance for two puffed-up jockeys on the River Thames (Rule Britannia in the orchestra).

But excerpts tend to stress the "look" of a choreographer at the expense of his essence - and overall we don't get from this visit a powerful argument of why Bournonville is great, more a slightly dutiful recital by a company not all of whose members look wholly on message.

True, in snippets Bournonville's dainty women and bouncy men have no chance to develop the expressive character that he was famous for. Le Conservatoire, for instance, has a great story about a man who advertised for a wife in the newspapers, and some complex intrigues when more than one woman replied. It seems a pity that we got merely the dancing class excerpt, which advertised the corps de ballet's charms somewhat duffly.

One got a sense among several soloists, though, of Bournonville's lively challenge, his demand for tossing off bravura difficulties with utmost effortlessness and natural sweetness. Above all, the exceptional Thomas Lund and Caroline Cavallo made the Flower Festival in Genzano pas de deux a flirtation of consummate danced finesse, yet with the air of two lovers running hand-in-hand through a daisy field.

I wish the La Sylphide pas de deux, clipped from its strange dramatic context, had more imaginative period lighting and atmosphere, because, though Silja Schandorff's sylphide trod delicately and Mads Blangstrup danced James's swift scissor-beats and springs with fine pizzazz and looked splendid in his kilt, Løvenskjold's music is lumpen, and none of the supernatural frisson and revolutionary innovation that gave this ballet its enduring landmark status emerged.

- Until Sat. Tickets: 0870 737 7737

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