



The elusive glow of a legendary company

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16 February 2007 • 12:01am



Ismene Brown reviews American Ballet Theatre at Sadler's Wells

What splendid dancers American Ballet Theatre has, all competing for the spotlight. But this sort of flying visit may not be the best way to show a company as more than a collection of contrasted individuals.

Historically, ABT is known for its dancers, whereas New York City Ballet existed for its genius choreographer (George Balanchine).

Stars flew across oceans to join ABT - Alicia Markova, Alicia Alonso and Mikhail Baryshnikov among others - and great choreographers batten on great dancers. Hence ABT has the most succulently eclectic store cupboard of repertory anywhere, from Fokine and Tudor to Tharp and Morris, and the largest Russian classic stagings in the US, too.

Several of its riches are on show at Sadler's Wells, and opening night had two: Balanchine's 1947 *Symphonie Concertante*, to Mozart's lyrical violin-viola double concerto, and Twyla Tharp's sizzling 1986 *In the Upper Room*. But first night felt flat, partly because breaking up two big pieces with assorted pas de deux makes a bitty filling, and partly because some performers danced below their reputations.

I was most disappointed by *Symphonie Concertante*, a subtle concerto for female corps, with two ballerinas reflecting the bright violin and darker viola (rich-toned Helen Kamminga). The violin and viola often break out of the ensemble into personal conversation, which the ballerinas need to interpret quasi-spontaneously with their own musicality - sadly, too sophisticated for perky blonde Michele Wiles and sumptuous brunette Veronika Part.

Part, who used to adorn the Kirov Ballet, has the monumental beauty of the Statue of Liberty, but looks a lot less precise in her legs and feet since going to America, while Wiles rarely seemed to hear what the violin was saying at all. The middle movement is this work's glowing heartland, with the two women joined by a man (Maxim Beloserkovsky, very fine), and a small corps - a mysterious, allusive set-up, danced neatly but without flavour, lacking an overall grace of argument. The routine musical performance contributed.

Three pas de deux featured ABT's starriest "principles", as the programme grandly misspells it. The principle here seemed to be stylish virtuosity, as none of the duets brought its own story to the stage.

However, bouquets in decreasing order to José Manuel Carreño, the world's most aristocratic Cuban dancer, playing a fastidiously roistering pirate in *Le Corsaire*, silvery Julie Kent in a bleeding chunk from *Swan Lake*, and sweet Misty Copeland as the fall-girl for an unexpectedly lightweight Angel Corella in *Sinatra Songs*, Tharp's 1983 fan-letter to Baryshnikov which looks dessicated without him.

Tharp's *In the Upper Room*, though, is unquenchable, even in a tired performance such as this. Made for ABT 21 years ago, when it shocked and amused in equal measure, it's a conjuror's mixture of athletics in sneakers and ballet on pointe, shuffle-and-jab meets pirouette-and-leap, dressed (and increasingly undressed) in striped pyjamas, and all shrouded in mist, as if in a temple to aerobics. Philip Glass's music always surprises me with its irresistibility.

Gillian Murphy, David Hallberg and Ethan Stiefel seized my eyes with their exact, attacking energy but several others were jogging through a familiar park.

- Three programmes until Sun. Tickets: 0870 737 7737