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The Prince of the Pagodas, The Royal Ballet

The problems of Kenneth MacMillan's fairytale are the performers', not the creators'

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Sunday, 3 June 2012

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Beige: Marianela Nuñez and Nehemiah Kish as Princess Rose and her Prince (cum salamander)

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As Mrs Thatcher used to say, don't bring me problems, bring me solutions. Solutions have been flung with a will at the problem ballet of Kenneth MacMillan's last years, his orientalist fairytale *The Prince of the Pagodas* - the Royal Ballet's retiring director Monica Mason revived it last night as one of her last presentations, determined that a new generation should have the chance to love it.

Cut, tightened up, re-edited 10 years after its choreographer's death (a collaboration between MacMillan's widow and the Royal Ballet, with the reluctant blessing of the Benjamin Britten Estate), *The Prince of the Pagodas* remains an adult fairytale of many riches, narrative, scenic, choreographic, and it has above all the magnetic draw of a properly fabulous score. I felt the ballet's magic on its last outing at Covent Garden in 1996, but last night I was less enchanted. Some of this I would put down to habitual Royal Ballet first-night rawness, but also some unconvincing casting that hardly ensured the new edition would carry the ballet into

“Princess Rose undergoes a stark Freudian nightmare of faceless, unpleasant men, and her dream prince has been turned into a salamander”

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“ In first-night casting the virtuous team were almost entirely trounced by the dark forces ”

The best fairytales reveal the abyss, unfathomable mystery, the eternal war between evil and goodness. MacMillan's take is contemporary, much indebted to the unsuccessful originating *Pagodas* ballet of his friend and colleague, John Cranko, yet there are several juicy personal MacMillan themes

here, male brutality, dysfunctional families, vulnerable innocence. Many children's stories echo in *Pagodas* - from *The Sleeping Beauty* to *Alice in Wonderland* to *The Frog Prince* - but the journey faced by Princess Rose is a stark Freudian nightmare of faceless, unpleasant men, and her dream prince has been turned into a salamander, a slithery thing who wriggles on the ground.

Family life is hell: her father, the Emperor, is a crippled Lear who unwisely portions his lands between his two daughters, Rose getting most, and therefore suffering the rage of her black-hearted sister Épine, who seizes the crown and casts a reptilian transformation over Rose's handsome prince. Her minder, and in some ways her magical protector, is the court Fool, who both enlightens her understanding of adulthood and also counters her sorceress sister's powers, like the Lilac Fairy blowing away Carabosse in *The Sleeping Beauty*. Then there is the pivotal dramatic difficulty which is the matter of the Prince himself, who switches between salamander and himself without warning, sometimes "real", sometimes "dream", not always well-signalled for the audience.

This is complicated territory, and it's spectacularly set by the late Nicholas Georgiadis in a sort of toy Tudor palace full of courtiers with hugely stuffed breeches, big hair and big sticks, a satirical setting that reminds me of the subversive theatrics of Punch and Judy. Yet it's not children's stuff, and it needs stirring dramatic and dancing performances in the key roles to unify it into a strong magical fable for adults.

MacMillan's 1989 version made a 19-year-old Darcey Bussell a star, exploiting her dazzling youth and hungry innocence alongside the statuesque Jonathan Cope as the salamander Prince (**watch the video extract below**). He also notably had Anthony Dowell as the pathetic king, ensuring that attention was fully claimed on behalf of the good guys. Last night went the other way in some imbalanced casting emphasised by less than polished orchestral playing.

Above, an extract from the 1989 DVD with Darcey Bussell and Jonathan Cope

I'd imagine that much will improve in later performances, but in the first-night casting the virtuous team were almost entirely trounced by the dark forces.

Marianela Nuñez made a delectably maidenly but rather anonymous Princess Rose, Alastair Marriott overdid the Emperor's trembles, and the correct, dull Nehemiah Kish was a beige choice as the Prince-cum-salamander - come in, Edward Watson? Or Thiago Soares? The exception was Alexander Campbell as The Fool, tellingly played despite his chalkface makeup and orange fright wig with an air of anxiety and true urgency in his dancing.

Instead it was Tamara Rojo romping home with the dramatic honours and the audience clapometer as evil Princess Épine, dancing with spiky brilliance and casual malevolence. Close behind her as eyecatchers came Valeri Hristov and Steven McRae among the four dubiously distinctive Kings of North, South, East and West, for whom MacMillan provides some fascinatingly perverse solos and partnering work. Hristov as the self-absorbed oriental with his mirror and McRae as the fiendishly foppish European, dancing their roles with exact physical character. In my fantasy cast, Carlos Acosta would be the pelvic, violent King of the South, not that nice Ricardo Cervera.

And the final *corps de ballet* scene - a majestic classical tribute by MacMillan to the great setpiece *grand pas* of Petipa's 19th-century ballets - should be marshalled by finer stylists than Helen Crawford and Itziar Mendizabal. That makes a lot of nitpicks. But *The Prince of the Pagodas*' chief problems are the performers' not the creators', the challenges of its score and its characters to the top-speed timetabling of a ballet house that apparently expects not to have to spend too much time on

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complications. Put two superbly imaginative actor-dancers in the two lead roles, polish that score and the stage management until they gleam, and the problems will melt away. Basically, this remains a fascinating ballet looking for its cast.

- *The Prince of the Pagodas is performed on Wednesday, Saturday 9, 13, 18, 21, 27 and 29 June at the Royal Opera House*

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