



OD/GEM

Mick Jagger at Knebworth, 1976

a bid for 1976 as the musical *ne plus ultra*, though much that occurred in it remains far from my taste. The Stones at Knebworth were magisterial — the set was significantly longer than any they'd played that year — and a reminder that a certain type of tumescent British rock 'n' roll was fearlessly alive. But rock, broadly, had already moved into far more fascinating terrain (much of which I still cherish) than the Stones would ever step into.

1976 bequeathed us Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life* (aged 66, Wonder last month performed the entire record in Hyde Park), Bob Dylan's driving *Desire* and Bowie's sonically most achieved album, *Station to Station*. Genesis, post-Peter Gabriel, announced their staying power by releasing two albums — and would become a key enormo-act of the 1980s. Towards the end of the year, Elton John came up with the entrancing double-album *Blue Moves*, containing the richest and most variegated music of his career.

In the King's Road, meanwhile, a fierce

anti-hippie energy was brewing: a backlash against everything Knebworth seemed to stand for. Malcolm McLaren, helped by Vivienne Westwood and based at their boutique Sex, was creating a band. The Sex Pistols' live performances in 1976, always chaotic — fomented by McLaren to guarantee a new and total anarchy in pop — caught the attention of like-minded, angry wannabe bandmakers. The Buzzcocks, Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Clash and the Damned formed. By the end of the year punk, helped on its way by a groundbreaking US quartet called the Ramones, was in putative full cry.

Johnny Rotten would scoff at the British establishment: the country was a miserable, ugly place, 'so you got us'. The punks were a shock in 1976, often credited with killing off rock's old guard. In fact, for longer than is usually acknowledged, the old and new happily co-existed. Punk, which I never liked, wore itself out in 1978, but its shrunken, aggressive aesthetic had a profound impact on the music and of course the fashion of the next decade, and beyond.

outrageously ugly. And even if I was and remain ambivalent about the Stones and punk, there, in 1976, they both indelibly reside. Four decades on, I'm powerless to do anything other than name it the best — or at least most shape-shifting — year of all.

## Dance

### Young at heart

Ismene Brown

#### The Taming of the Shrew; The Flames of Paris; Le Corsaire

Bolshoi Ballet, Royal Opera House

The second half of the Bolshoi tour brought much fresher fare than the first: following the ubiquitous warhorses *Don Quixote* and *Swan Lake*, we got three jolly nights of Moscow speciality: an iffy Shakespeare comedy nailed by superb performing, a giddy rewrite of Stalin's favourite ballet and a breathtakingly fruity restoration of a 19th-century ballet entertainment, with pirate ships, dancing gardens and a vision of the hedonistic life of abducted women somewhat at odds with Boko Haram's.

The sexual politics of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* are potentially tricky for ballet since the woman is physically dependent on the man. But Monte Carlo choreographer Jean-Christophe Maillot was quite smart in his very modern-mannered 2014 creation for the Bolshoi at exploiting how body language can contradict or invert the intention of classical vocabulary, the psychology of movement.

For sure, oafish Petruchio drunkenly drags Katharina about by her armpits, but in the glowering Kristina Kretova's expressive flounces, this girl radiates total impatience with the kind of feline wiliness of sister Bianca — brilliantly smug Nina Kaptsova, all pretty-pretty, smiley-smiley, men drooling all over her — and she loathes dapper types.

The whole cast was infectiously in tune with the don't-care swagger of the Shostakovich medley of film and operetta, and the TV-commercial, exhibition-stand ephemerality of the designs. Yanina Parienko was a priceless glossy Housekeeper, and Denis Medvedev and Igor Tsvirko perfect comic idealisations of ridiculous men. Maillot sweeps the narrative along very neatly with the musical numbers, apart from a lumbering wedding night for Katharina and Petruchio, with the ninth symphony stomping 'DSCH' all over it, and some E.L. James-ish sexual psychologising. Still, all ends happily in a tea party and multiple happy couples. While it's a superficial creation and won't



last, this felt vibrant and young on stage, like the Bolshoi of today, entirely unlike the rote performers of *Don Quixote* the other week.

Much more interesting as balletic artworks are *The Flames of Paris* and *Le Corsaire*, historical landmarks of the early Soviet era and the mid-19th century, revised by the Bolshoi's former artistic director, Alexei Ratmansky. *Flames* is a flag-fluttering romp about the French Revolution, beloved of Stalin, with paysanne Jeanne and actress Mireille de Poitiers joining the hordes storming the effete, glittering Bourbon court.

But Ratmansky's reworking of the relics of the original 1932 Vainonen choreography and plot now adds multiple layers of enjoyment of choreographic styling — folk, ballet, court dance — and a liquorice-dark undercurrent about the saleability of loyalties. I've seen it several times since its 2007 debut, and I find more and more to appreciate in it (not least Boris Asafiev's admirable Lully/Beethoven pastiche score). It's marvellous spectacle, intelligent artifice, and tremendous dancing, entirely Bolshoi, especially the highly kitsch ending with a head in a bag.

And so, too, is the new *Le Corsaire*, Petipa's picturesque companion piece to *Don Quixote*, written in the same decade, the 1860s, but this one about swashbuckling in the Levant, rather than castanet-clicking in Seville. Both of them are nuts, but depend-

*Flames is marvellous spectacle, intelligent artifice and tremendous dancing, entirely Bolshoi*

ably at some point the girls will dance an extended number in such floral glory as to break your heart, and the lead pair will dance a terrifically difficult pas de deux. In this case, the pas de deux washes over the British audience with warm familiarity, because it's the one with which Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn enslaved us all in a legendary video: the queen and the slave, she in all her gorgeous demure sexiness, he unclad, wild and panting like a stallion.

We could have done with some Nureyevan sizzle, I thought, on the Bolshoi's final night. I love redheaded Ekaterina Krysanova's taste in execution of Medora's pernickety steps, though she didn't entirely appreciate Pavel Klinichev's masterly conducting of the delicious entertainments of the original score, dominated by Adam and Delibes. Igor Tsvirko made a fabulously chic pirate in his mullet, moustache and ringlets — more Johnny Depp in style than Nureyev — but the soloists generally seem rather unenthusiastic about the 19th-century style that Ratmansky's production with the historian Yuri Burlaka attempts to restore to us. It's much quieter in the legs, more delicate and lilting, than the all-guns-blazing athleticism of the later revisions — more Ashton-

ian perhaps than the Bolshoi are famed for.

The Act 2 'Jardin Animé', cramming the Covent Garden stage with both flowerbeds and the entire Bolshoi corps de ballet bedecked in garlands, is a piece of kinetic theatre to enchant the eyes, more intricately woven and gorgeously detailed than any choreographer since Petipa could make. With the leg-up quotient reduced, the swing quotient is enhanced, most visibly in the oriental lushness of the corps de ballet's bodies. Moscow's corps de ballet remain, for me, the stars of the Bolshoi — rather than its 'stars' per se — so elegant, light-hearted, individual, and alive to the stage.

This is my last column as *The Spectator's* dance spectator. It's been the deepest pleasure to wander on your behalf around the fertile landscape of dance, but I'm off to Oxford University to do some research. Thank you for bearing with my thoughts and I hope you bought a few tickets as a result.

## Opera What's love got to do with it?

Michael Tanner

### The Queen of Spades

Opera Holland Park

### Thunderstorm

Shanghai Opera House, London Coliseum

Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* is probably his greatest opera, certainly the one in which his characteristic strengths are on display. Pondering on them inevitably leads one to think about what the operas lack, too, and it turns out to be quite a lot. Unlike the finest opera composers, of whom there are regrettably few, he can't create complete characters: what he is interested in is characteristics, especially — or perhaps only — obsessions, even if the obsession, as with Eugene Onegin, is with not being obsessed with anything, until close to the end.

In *The Queen of Spades* the anti-hero Herman is doubly obsessed, though Tchaikovsky and his librettist brother Modest didn't really pull this off, so we aren't ever really sure whether he is in love with Liza, or whether his only interest throughout is in the cards which will secure his fortune. The music for the scene in which he comes on strongly to Liza and convinces her wouldn't have convinced me, and it's no surprise that it isn't long before it no longer convinces Herman either — he spends the rest of the opera in single-minded and murderous pursuit of the old Countess. If by 'love-duet' one means a duet in which the participants succeed in expressing their love for one another, or feel it growing, then Tchaikovsky's only successful one is in the tone poem

*Romeo and Juliet*, since the feelings intensely rendered there are not specific to one or other of the lovers.

These urgent matters are not explored in the new production by Rodula Gaitanou at Opera Holland Park, but in its straightforward way it is very satisfying, presenting the story as simply as possible in an elegant and practical setting. These fairly cash-strapped companies are brilliant at creating an impression of glamour with very small means, while an oversubsidised Royal Opera spends a fortune in creating unconvincing squalor. The opening scene — even more strongly influenced by *Carmen* than *Onegin* is — is brought to life, and thanks to the spirited conducting of Peter Robinson it manages to create an atmosphere without seeming merely to mark time. After that nearly all the characters are dressed in black throughout, laying the gloom on too thick, but the wide stage is still handsome to look at.

From the start the grim figure of Herman is inescapable: Peter Wedd is one of those performers one looks at even when they aren't singing. When Wedd does sing, he is as powerful as ever, and to the extent that the opera permits he gives the impression of being a three-dimensional character. So, at least as much, does Natalya Romaniw as Liza: she has already made a name for herself at OHP in two contrasting operas, and elsewhere. With a rich pure voice, she builds up the character without having a great deal to go on, and her suicide aria was almost unbearable. Tchaikovsky gives us a trio of climactic death scenes: the most exciting is the first, as the decrepit and senilely bad-tempered Countess sings that marvellous little aria and dies of terror when Herman approaches — Rosalind Plowright made a meal of that; then the canal scene with Liza; and finally Herman's descent into utter insanity as he finds the Countess has tricked him. Wedd rose superbly to that last scene, since his histrionic gifts are the equal of his vocal ones. Even so, it's the first of the scenes that wrings my withers, and the rest seems to be merely inevitable. But this is a thrilling production which maintained the astonishingly high standard that OHP now regularly operates on.

Shanghai Opera House has brought *Thunderstorm*, described by the Chinese ambassador as 'this original creation, a western-style opera with rich oriental music elements', with music by Mo Fan, setting a play by Cao Yu, who 'has been somehow referred to as the Shakespeare of China', according to the president of Shanghai Opera House. I wonder how. The plot is of the decline and fall of a prosperous modern Chinese family, with sexual and romantic intrigues involving both incest and relations with servants. The idiom of the music is almost entirely western, specifically Italian early 20th century, with occasional touches of chinoiserie, but