

In the shadow of Gene's genius

Ismene Brown

Published: 12:01AM BST 06 Aug 2004

Ismene Brown reviews *Singin' in the Rain* at Sadler's Wells

It is a bold man who stages and rewrites possibly the best Hollywood film musical of all time. Adam Cooper, star of the Royal Ballet and Matthew Bourne's iconoclastic *Swan Lake* and *Cinderella*, is increasingly attempting to become a player in British musical theatre, putting landmark musicals through complete re-choreographies, uncowed by the reputations of their makers.



Over-courteous: Adam Cooper (left) is sexier than Gene Kelly but more reserved

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Last year, he fairly successfully re-choreographed *On Your Toes*, a rather rum musical famous for its iconic ballet scene by George Balanchine. Now he goes ambitiously for *Singin' in the Rain*, with that song, that man and that downpour daring him to supersede them.

Of course, he can't. Cooper's production with the Leicester Haymarket's director Paul Kerryson is a respectful tribute to the 1952 movie, Anglicising its snaggle-toothed, high-strung Americanism in a genial way that falls between the two riskier stools of recreating a superb period hit to the hilt or totally updating it. And why not take the risk?

The plot, after all, is about surviving revolutionary technological change. Don Lockwood and Lina Lamont are silent-movie stars whose specific skills are about to be rendered redundant or ridiculous in the new techniques of talkies. Would a modern context be impossible?

Other niggles that arise from dealing with a legendary musical: production values are not quite West End enough, with sedate musical direction for the fine songs (leading to sedate dancing) and flat sets with gaps at the sides.

Performances, too, don't - except for one shining exception - make the legendary grade required. Our comfortable era no longer grooms hordes of hungry triple-threat actor-singer-dancers, competitively sharpening their idiosyncrasies - the era out of which Gene Kelly and co emerged.

Cooper is probably the next best thing today. He can dance, can sing a little in a light baritone, and he choreographs OK, even if he is not able to supply on stage the riskiness that movie shoots made possible. And he certainly looks much, much sexier than Kelly when soaked to the skin under Sadler's Wells's copious water supply.

But as an actor he is somewhat inhibited by his natural modesty from playing the full-out, self-absorbed, electrically attractive star, and merges into his ensembles a touch over-courteously. Josefina Gabrielle as Kathy, the girl who dubs Lamont's voice and steals her man, doesn't need star power but does need charm, and doesn't have enough of it.

Simon Coulthard hoofs neatly as the Donald O'Connor sidekick but doesn't register a big personality. What raises the show is the devastating scene-stealing of Ronni Ancona as Lina Lamont. As a stand-up comic and brilliant TV impressionist she surely

understands stars' inner compulsions, and she brings megawatt vanity and a subtle poignancy to the flaky dumb-blonde type here.

Platinum curls tossing, mobile face registering every tiny, delayed thought in her tiny brain, her mouth emits the sound of four-inch nails scraping a blackboard, so that even she seems to wince slightly when she speaks.

The movie preview scene, in which sound and vision become disconnected, is unspeakably funny and Ancona's stage career is surely waiting to happen.

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