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REVIEW

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*Northern Ballet Theatre**Mixed Bill: 'As Time Goes By',
'Angels in the Architecture',
'A Simple Man'**May 2009
London, Sadler's Wells**by Jane Simpson*

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Northern Ballet Theatre is presenting this triple bill as part of its 40th anniversary celebrations, so it's easy to understand why Gillian Lynne's *A Simple Man* is included - one of the most-remembered pieces from the company's earlier days, and one particularly associated with Christopher Gable, who is remembered with such affection and gratitude by NBT audiences.

The rest of the programme, according to artistic director David Nixon, is designed to celebrate the company's present rather than its past, and to show off the current generation of dancers. On the earlier part of the tour the show opened with the Shades scene from *La Bayadère*, but that has now been replaced by Nixon's own *As Time Goes By*, a worked-up version of a piece originally made for a gala at his previous company, BalletMet Columbus. In that context it

may have passed muster, but at Sadler's Wells it looked like a make-weight, a me-too songbook ballet which worked the dancers hard but didn't reward them with roles of any depth or significance - a flat start to the evening.

Fortunately there was more to be got from the next piece, *Angels in the Architecture*, by Canadian-based choreographer Mark Godden. This starts with the advantage of a wonderful score, played live by the company's own orchestra. Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* was of course composed for Martha Graham, but Godden - far from having been influenced by Graham's masterpiece - apparently didn't even know of its existence, and used the music to explore some aspects of the life of the Shakers (who are usually associated with nineteenth



century America but began as an offshoot of the Quakers, and in Manchester - a neat NBT tie-up). The twelve dancers create a strong sense of community and the contemporary choreography is appropriately clear and unfussy. There are some beautiful stage pictures, often created with the help of the women's long, full skirts; iconic Shaker artefacts - brooms and chairs - feature heavily. On the surface it's serene and cheerful, and witty too at moments, but there are some oddities which hint at female repression and leave a slightly sour taste. It does, though, meet the objective of letting the dancers show what they can do, and of course the music would carry even a much less inventive work.

So far this could have been any company, anywhere: it was only with *A Simple Man* that we got something to show off the strengths which these days define NBT. Strongly drawn characters in a clear and engaging narrative are what the company's extremely loyal audience mostly expects to see, and Lynne certainly delivers them. In the original television production the two leading roles - L. S. Lowry and his dominating mother - were danced by Gable and Moira Shearer, with Lynn Seymour taking over from Shearer in later tours of the stage version. Hard acts to follow, so it was good to see Darren Goldsmith and Nathalie Leger finding their own way into the roles - Goldsmith in particular seemed to me entirely successful despite being so completely different from Gable both physically and (apparently) temperamentally. There are lots of cameo roles for the rest of the company, too, with Georgina May as Ann and Julie Charlet as the tennis player sharing the honours with Michael Berkin (*Man in a Quandry*), and even the children from the Central School are clearly defined individuals.



Darren Goldsmith as Lowry in *A Simple Man*
© Bill Cooper

Lynne has found a good balance between Lowry's life and his art: the paintings set the scenes, as it were, but it's the artist's tangled relationship with his mother that

shapes the work and provides the most memorable episodes. Lynne's choreography is also at its most interesting in the confrontations between the two of them; elsewhere, especially in the big set pieces for the flat-caps-and-clogs corps de ballet, I felt we were looking at 'numbers' - padding, essentially, adding nothing to our understanding of Lowry or his world. But I think it's important that NBT should keep this piece alive. As Nixon points out, much of the company's early repertory has been lost for one reason or another, and there's not much point in boasting about being 40 if you've nothing left of the first half of your life.

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