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REVIEW

ballet.*magazine**Royal Ballet**'Isadora', 'Dances at a Gathering'**March 2009**London, Covent Garden**by Paul Arrowsmith*

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Isadora is credited in the ROH period 3 leaflet to Fokine (“first performed 1981”, presumably a posthumous work). For its exhumation of Isadora, the RB programme contains Deborah MacMillan’s dedication “to the memory of Norman Morrice who shared Kenneth’s belief in the infinite possibilities of dance.” After the success of Mayerling, and the need for a major new work for the RB’s 50th anniversary season in May 1981, who would not have shared such belief in MacMillan? But without MacMillan’s name on the concept and treatment, would such a work as Isadora really have been indulged by the ROH management? Or without the controlling conviction of Deborah MacMillan, would Isadora have been revived now?

The 1982 RB programme biography of MacMillan remembers the work as “undeniably theatrical, Isadora nevertheless caused much controversy in dance circles.” John Percival, then dance critic of The Times has written , that “the choreographer and the Royal Ballet claimed that dance reviewers were too blinkered to assess its theatrical qualities fairly. But when I therefore asked the drama critic of The Times, Irving Wardle, to review it for Dance & Dancers, he didn’t like it either.” Others were more direct – “the biggest mistake of his career” Ashton is quoted (on the casting of the title role).

The new Isadora remains an uneasy amalgam, occupying the nebulous world of tv docudrama. It retains much of the original choreography and there are some searing moments, a major plus. But those “infinite possibilities of dance” alone don’t support the narrative, (not atypically for MacMillan). Not to be literal



minded, if, instead, we look for a more impressionistic treatment, the choreography itself does not explain why Isadora the person was so unique, so fascinating and why MacMillan was so drawn to her. For example, the work begins with what essentially is a “Sixth Brahms’ Waltz in the Manner of...” The Isadora we see here is galumphing and really rather ridiculous. Yet when an essentially similar solo is repeated for the grieving Isadora, she appears vulnerable and touching. Could this be an example of how dance can reveal infinite possibilities? How dance can reveal different facets of the same complex, maddening personality? The mad, bad and dangerous Isadora, enfant terrible of the dance world. Might there be an element of self-identification here too for MacMillan?

My literal mind is not convinced. As if to answer those questions we have film and voiceover, needy props to shore up what dance is unable alone to express. Some make sense where the dance alone does not convey anything – Craig is nothing without the film and voice overlay. But too often the film segments pre-empt (and so diminish) the dance sequences they precede. For example, the danced scenes for the Isadorable school, the 1905 revolution, Louie Fuller’s appearance don’t add to what we have seen on film. The film clip and the danced sequence show Fuller as intentionally ridiculous. Yet the hectoring voiceover tells next how inspirational Fuller was for Isadora. Which do we trust – the words, the film, the choreography?

And what voiceover! I have happy memories of Nichola McAuliffe as the feisty heroine of Kiss Me Kate. Here, though McAuliffe’s delivery is too insistent, too grating and too much Edith Sitwell in full spate. The spoken narrative overdominates the work and Isadora the woman is reduced to an aggravating, ridiculous, self-indulgent life. Altogether this Isadora is inchoate.

The ending is shocking in its arbitrariness – but would that it had ended there, rather than larding it with yet another hectoring voiceover. (If we do need to hear Isadora here, why not the sound of a gramophone running down, a voice and life extinguished?).

Best of the choreography was the raw, savage, ugly grieving duet for Isadora and Singer – shocking in its intensity and brevity. Similarly powerful was Isadora’s grieving solo, effective for its lack of artifice. It was interesting to see Isadora take a dominant role in her various duets rather than be the usual compliant MacMillan doll manipulated by the men. Singer and the man on the beach were obviously exploited for what Isadora wanted.

Of the performances, Isabel McMeekan gave a totally committed performance (her facial expressions were well nuanced) – and yet seemed remote, detached from the piece. Christopher Saunders made Singer human. Stepanek on the beach showed vulnerability and confusion as well as his usual elegance – I hope we will see him as Des Grieux. Soares was luxury casting (but wasted) in the tango. Pennefather remained a cipher as Craig.

The relatively small work for the corps is not distinguished, with familiar MacMillan images – the shiny macs and brollies from Mayerling for the mourners, the revolutionary underclass from Anastasia, the charlestoning couples echoing Elite Syncopations – all straying in.





Yuhui Choe, Lauren Cuthbertson and Samantha Raine in *Dances at a Gathering*
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Dances at a Gathering was perfect programming – a cold bath after the hot house of Isadora. There was tremendous rapport between all the dancers. The hour flew! Not everything was perfect; though better than last year, the finale does not yet have the stillness and ache that NYCB imbue here. The best performances were the most natural, the most relaxed: Cervera as brick and Morera as apricot were stunning throughout but especially in their duet, charming, fun, spontaneous. In blue, Raine and Stepanek confirmed the positive, fresh impression they conveyed last year. Of the others, Choe in pink was remarkably assured and confident, but too consciously a ballerina. Brown is one of those roles where Acosta's physical power looks throttled. Benjamin in green has toned down her grandeur from last year but this still looked too artificially acted a reading. For the first time in this revival, Dances looked fully a masterpiece.

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