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Paloma Herrera in *Swan Lake*. Photo: Rosalie O'Connor

American Ballet Theatre in London

DEBORAH WEISS, MAGGIE FOYER, EMMA MANNING and MIKE DIXON catch different casts in McKenzie's *Swan Lake* and Holmes' *Corsaire* at the London Coliseum

American Ballet Theatre's second visit in as many years was a prospect I relished. It is, after all, a company overflowing with good dancers. As part of the London Coliseum's Spring Dance season, they bravely brought Kevin McKenzie's production of *Swan Lake*, a ballet of which we see a great deal in this country (albeit different versions), so drawing comparisons was inevitable. There are many positive aspects of both the production and the dancing but, as with most classics, the ultimate success of the performance lies in the quality of the principals.

Zack Brown's costumes and sets are a bit of mix and match, and period detail was blurred, but the back drops work wonderfully well in all four acts. Some of the costumes looked cumbersome, namely the girls' dresses in the Act I Waltz, which seemed to work against the flow of pirouettes, and the boys' cycling shorts did nothing to enhance their line. Act III may have seemed chocolate boxy for some, but I liked the richly coloured flamboyance.

The most significant change to what we know as the traditional *Swan Lake* was McKenzie's introduction of two von Rothbarts – a swamp-like creature lurking in the background in the white acts, and a lusty, swashbuckling, 'dancing' Rothbart in the third act. Purists may shun this idea, but actually it leaves you in no doubt about the drama unfolding and Marcello Gomes, who was the 'danc-

ing' Rothbart on opening night, did a great deal to lift what was otherwise a rather flat performance.

The company are strong in the middle ranks – Sarah Lane, Isabella Boylston and Danil Simkin (who looks like a teenager) gave a superlative pas de trois. Cygnets and Big Swans were impeccable and we enjoyed 94 year-old Frederic Franklin gracing the stage as The Tutor in Act I. Some of the corps de ballet scenes were uneven – a couple of bumps around the Maypole in Act I, a few errant swans – but generally good. In David Hallberg, ABT has a noble Prince Siegfried. A tall, elegant dancer, he is exceptionally fluid and his neat, pointed feet and perfect lines are ideal for this role. He is also an attentive partner and if perhaps he was a little too intense and withdrawn (in Act III particularly), his feelings for Odette were clear from the outset. If Hallberg epitomised graciousness, then Gomes was the antithesis, overtly seducing every female within his sights (Queen Mum included). He was all malevolence and fire, setting the stage alight in his Act III solo. He was fabulous. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for Michele Wiles as Odette/Odile. She is a strong technician with good pirouettes – the famous fouettés, a case in point – but her Odette was far too brittle. Rippling arms, pliable neck, back and an abundance of grace are prerequisites in this role. Those qualities were not much in evidence, and it is also essential to believe that she falls in love with Siegfried; it's not just a one sided affair. Wiles did not connect with Hallberg (try as he might) and she did not allow us an opportunity to feel sympathy for her plight. Her Odile was a mere shadow after the dazzle of Gomes' electric performance. I am sure she is a wonderfully accomplished dancer in other roles, but the subtle complexities of Odette/Odile eluded her on this occasion. Sadly, my lasting impression of the performance was emptiness. D.W.

The second night of ABT's *Swan Lake* ratcheted the excitement up a notch or two. It may not have found the desirable balance between white and black acts, but the thrills in Act III went a long way to compensate.

Act I is a little loose in structure; the maypole is too distracting and a more reflective close would have linked better with the melancholy of Act II. Angel Corella, however, was utterly charming, as every Prince should be, dancing with elegance and ease. Yuriko Kajiya, the star of the pas de trois, showed a beautifully expressive upper body combined with a magnificent jump.

Gillian Murphy is not a natural Odette, looking soulful but missing the vulnerability of the tremulous swan maiden. However she made up for this in Act III where the evening really took off. The Neopolitan duo, Carlos Lopez and Mikhail Ilyin, lit the fuse in an exuberant display of one-upmanship, delighting in out spinning each other. Kevin McKenzie's production offering an alter ego in the character of von Rothbart works well, building the sorcerer's stature and giving him the chance to prove both dance and acting prowess. Gennadi Savelliev took the opportunity with both hands, working his charms on the rejected Princesses in a series of seductive pas de deux before adding a touch of bravura in his solo. He settled on the throne next to the Queen with such panache that you knew the home team didn't stand a chance.

The heat was already on as the Prince and Odile take the stage. As Odile, Murphy is in her element. Every balance was

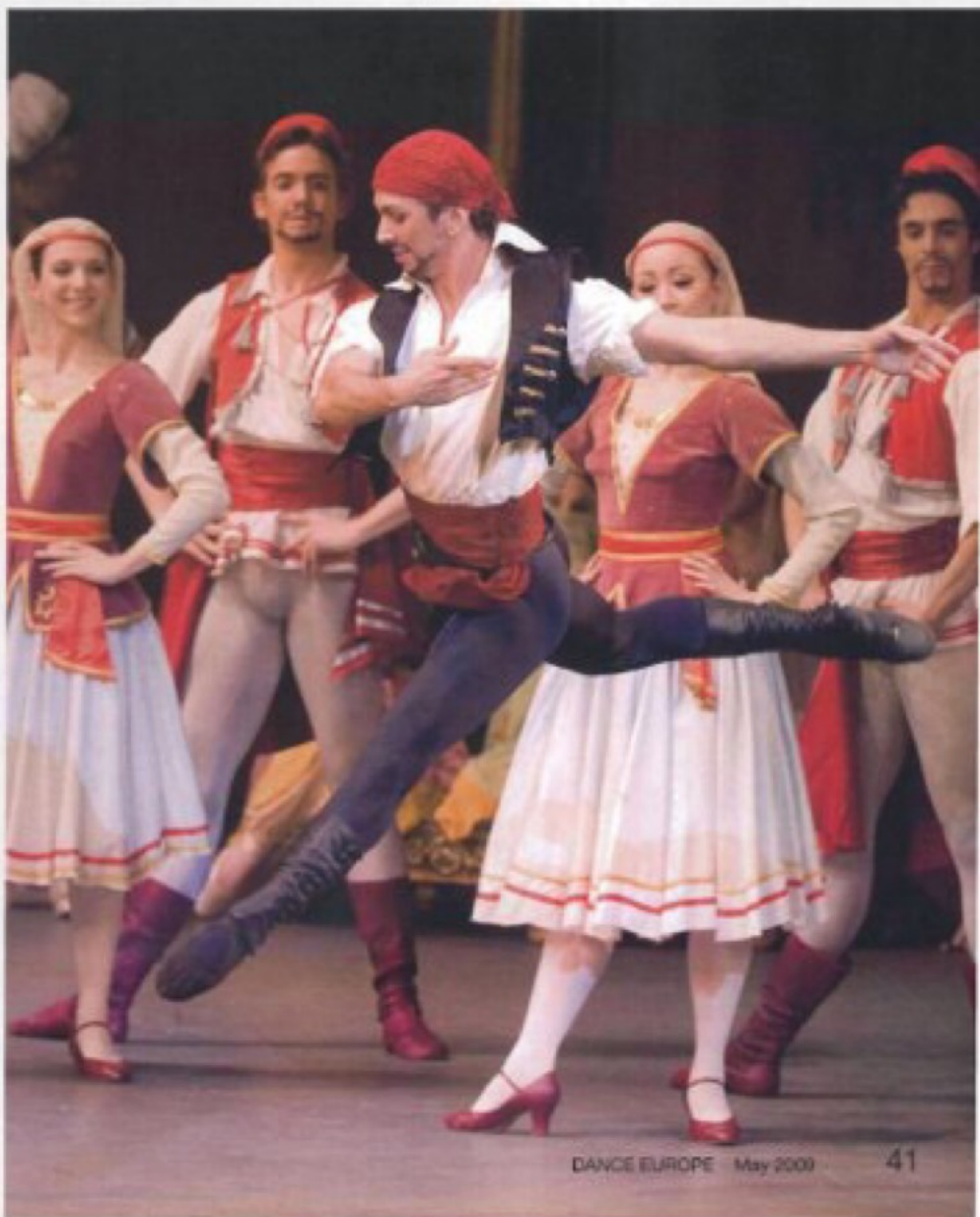
rock solid, every turn executed with consummate ease. This is a woman out to conquer totally and Corella soared through his solo, a man in thrall to her magic. The coda was taken at a cracking pace, Corella on brilliant form and Murphy's fouettés whipping up a storm. It ended in a blaze of triumphalism, the audience roaring approval.

The run on into Act IV is also effective, but at this performance a rather noisy scene change plus the constrained space on the apron of the stage worked against the poetry and the lovely patterning of sorrowful swans. The tragedy was not going to balance the thrills of the previous act but you can't win them all, and that Black Swan was well worth the price of the ticket. M.F.

Three things had perplexed many Londoners on ABT's opening night: why choose to bring *Swan Lake* when the Royal Ballet were performing the same ballet around the corner at Covent Garden; why put the plumpest girl in the corps in the front row; and why cast Michele Wiles – an Odette without soul and an Odile without allure – on the first night when there are surely more delectable Swan Queens in the company? No answers materialised but, as the season progressed, Kevin McKenzie's succinct production, less cluttered and more streamlined than the Royal's, stood up well to repeated viewings, while Paloma Herrera's Swan Queen on the final evening of the run made up for every sin on the planet.

Quite simply Herrera is sublime. Her technique is innate and every step is wrapped in the music. She is Odette – achingly fluid – and then, with equal conviction, she is Odile – shamelessly seducing Siegfried with her deliciously flashy turns as she steers the innocent prince to his Waterloo. Ethan

ABT – Carlos Lopez in *Le Corsaire*. Photo: Bill Cooper





Veronika Part as an Odalisque in *Le Corsaire*. Photo: Bill Cooper

Stiefel, a handsome Siegfried with clean lines and controlled landings, could not help but be enchanted by such an exquisite creature. Sympathetically in tune with each other, the couple formed an expressive partnership, highlighting aspects of the ballet's drama that often get lost. Especially touching is the moment when, standing alone on the cliff top at the start of Act IV, Odette contemplates taking her life until Siegfried catches her eye. This slight incident fuels an interest in and a need for the ensuing lakeside dancing that can often be bland.

In re-fashioning his Rothbart into a dual role McKenzie was inspired, in that the character carries far more weight. The ballroom Rothbart who, blazing through the court as he flirts with each of the foreign princesses before audaciously sitting himself on the throne, is surely a to-die-for role, and if Jared Matthews did not quite match Marcelo Gomes' reckless charisma, he came close.

Elsewhere there were also outstanding performances: from Renata Pavam, whose pas de trois variation was notably engaging; the extraordinary Frederic Franklin as Siegfried's Tutor; and Gennadi Savelliev leading the Czardas with unmissable aplomb. E.M.

While the *Corsaire* pas de deux shows up in every other gala, the ballet in its entirety is performed sparingly in the West even though it was originally premiered, with choreography by Joseph Mazilier, by the Paris Opera in 1856. The

early production was superseded by Marius Petipa's reworking at the Mariinsky in 1899, and it is this production, brought to the West by the Russians in the 1980s, on which most of today's *Corsaire* ballets draw. ABT's version was first staged for the Boston Ballet by Anna-Marie Holmes in 1997, and was acquired by ABT the following year. In one word it's a pantomime from start to finish and its rollercoaster plot about abducted maidens and scheming pirates is so improbable that it's irrelevant. Poet Bryon would never recognise his tale. The score, attributed to five different composers, is a glorious mishmash. What matters is the dancing, and with the calibre of cast that ABT can field, *Le Corsaire* makes a hugely entertaining evening. It is not, however, for purists averse to relentless circus, and as for those into nitpicking the production's authenticity - well, they need to get a life.

Opening and closing the ballet, Irina Tibilova's ship in full sail is wonderful fantasy and any mortal with a sense of adventure hankered to hop on board as the vessel bobbed over the Coliseum-generated waves en route to Turkey. Thank goodness, though, we didn't, because after three acts of riotous hokum the boat sinks and only Conrad and Medora, the ballet's key lovers, survive the storm by clinging onto a rock.

As Conrad, Marcelo Gomes makes a fabulous hunk of a pirate and he dances big. Jetés careering over the stage are major happenings and yet even in this swash-buckling role Gomes retains a supreme elegance - all



Gillian Murphy as Medora in *Le Corsaire*. Photo: Bill Cooper

Harley-Davidson, thoroughbred and polished. And, at the end of the work's signature pas de trois (more usually a pas de deux), a sensational divertissement here thanks to Angel Corella's electric performance as the slave Ali, Gomes motors in and nonchalantly scoops up the girl in a fait accompli. It was Corella, though, who won the evening's most ecstatic applause.

The girl is of course Medora, performed on this occasion by Gillian Murphy, a feisty soubrette who wraps triples with her arms in fifth into an explosive set of fouettés. But for all her technical whizz, Murphy does not seduce us. Her face lacks any spontaneous expression and she barely seemed to care whether she was being abducted or rescued - or perhaps she has yet to get to grips with the storyline too.

There's more convincing virtuosity from Herman Cornejo who, resplendent in red as the conniving Lankendem, sets the level at the beginning of the ballet with an amazing, immaculately controlled spin. The guy's better than champagne. His other is Gulnare, portrayed with lots of dazzle by Xiomara Reyes, whose blistering diagonal must have left holes in the lino, while the trio of odalisques - Maria Riccetto (whose light batterie has her skimming enchantingly across the stage), Kristi Boone and Veronika Part - afforded sensitively measured renditions of their respective variations. E.M.

The cast for the final performance of *Le Corsaire* did not quite match the stellar first night but had many felicities to offer, the best being Daniil Simkin as the slave-owning comedy villain Lankendem. This role combines humour with bravura dancing and Simkin offers full value on both counts. His eye-popping technical tricks and speed around the stage are balanced with a big, warm persona that is full of charm and wit. Slight of stature, he still

dominates any scenes in which he appears.

Cory Stearns as Conrad, the corsair of the title, has a long elegant line, a fine technique and partners well, but initially lacks charisma to a conspicuous degree. When he summons his followers to the fight in Act I, or physically subdues them in Act II, he looks equally unconvincing; yet curiously, he seems to discover a wholly new, fun-filled dimension to his personality in the last act. His Medora is Paloma Herrera: sexy, confident, luscious to the point of edibility, full of fun and on fine form for most of the ballet. In the second act she looks momentarily out of sorts until she rattles off a series of triple fouettés which seem to restore her equilibrium.

The Gulnare of Maria Riccetto features an elegant, long-limbed style, displaying finely nuanced dancing, particularly in her first variation, but she lacks both personality and warmth and has a mouth that opens and closes inappropriately, seemingly of its own volition.

Jose Manuel Carreño is the biggest name on the cast sheet but has the smallest of the male roles, Ali the Slave. However he makes the most of the dynamic opportunities offered to him. Looking sleek and toned, he still exhibits the voluptuous Cuban quality that has always characterised his dancing (and also that of his compatriot Carlos Acosta). In his big moments he annihilates the Coliseum's stage with huge jumps, yet his real quality lies in the fact that everything is all done exactly on the musical beat. This kind of musicality is getting rarer in bravura dancing and one longs to see more exemplars.

Carlos Lopez and Marian Butler are both effortlessly dynamic as Birbanto and the lead woman pirate and Lopez offers some buoyant, rapid footwork and well-oiled pirouettes. As the three Odalisques Sarah Lane is wonderfully light across the floor but has inexpressive arms, Misty Copeland has musicality and personality and Yuriko Kajiya can pirouette bang on the music but offers no facial expression at all. If one combined their best qualities one would end up with a fabulous dancer. M.D.