

TRIBUTE TO SIR KENNETH MACMILLAN: REVIEWS 1964–1992

Clement Crisp

Sir Kenneth MacMillan died at The Royal Opera House in October 1992. The tenth anniversary of his death is being marked by special performances of his works by the Royal Ballet, a conference, and a season of film, in what has become a MacMillan Year. In an issue partly dedicated to the art of dance criticism, Dance Research pays its own tribute to a great dynamic, dramatic and creative force in British dance by reprinting a selection of first night and 'early performance' reviews by Clement Crisp – a close friend of MacMillan whose writings on his works form an important legacy in their own right. These reviews all first appeared in the Financial Times. In turn, the next volume of Dance Research will consist of a collection of articles by major dance scholars, wishing to pay tribute to the professional contribution of Clement Crisp – as scholar, critic, teacher and mentor – who next year celebrates his fiftieth anniversary as a dance critic.

La Création du Monde, 13 February 1964

Kenneth MacMillan has owed us a light-hearted ballet for years; last night in Stratford-on-Avon the touring section of the Royal Ballet gave the first performance of his *Création du Monde*, a funny and curiously touching work. It tells the story of the Creation through a children's game – but these are sophisticated, urban, 'with it' teenagers, and the whole tale is seen in terms of 'Pop' Art. The music is Milhaud's cheerful jazz score, which has provided a neat starting point for MacMillan's off-beat, slightly cynical, and vastly theatrical piece.

At curtain-rise a group of children are decking themselves out in the tatters of a dressing-up box, watched by a butcher's boy (Adrian Grater) circling round on his bicycle. The butcher's boy brings on the Great Deity (Ronald Emblen), ring-master to the zany circus that is to enact the drama. A message flashes on a screen at the back of the stage – 'and for my next creation' – and

the Deity, in white leotard decorated with Union Jacks has just started his Creation with the animals when a large green apple (Adrian Grater again), lettered with greengrocer's jargon, and an amazingly sinuous snake (Elizabeth Anderton) appear. Another slogan comes on the screen, 'New Instant People', and there are Adam and Eve (Doreen Wells and Richard Farley). Their tights are stencilled with all the slang phrases, for man and woman: 'Bird', 'Guy', 'Filly', 'Butch', and so on. Their first lyrical duet has just changed into brighter dance-hall steps, when the sub-title 'I was a teenage snake' announces the Serpent, wildly hatted and ready to start the mischief. Despite all the efforts of the Great Deity with a wooden sword, Adam and Eve are lured to the apple. The result is inevitable and the Deity drives them away and is left disconsolately alone. The children return in street clothes and the Deity is driven off.

This is a ballet full of ideas, of gimmicks taken from 'Pop' Art but made completely balletic, and the tricks and the comic devices never obscure the basic strength of the dancing. At first viewing one is struck by the comic ingenuity of the conception and by the skill with which MacMillan has placed it within the stylistic limits both of a child's game and the ephemera of advertising. The treatment of slogans and the mannerisms of character are symbolic of a witty, slightly disillusioned view, which has been put over to the audience in an effortlessly inventive manner. The choreography is for the most part sharp and allusive – though warmly lyrical for Adam and Eve – and the characterisations are unforced, but underlying it is an implied moral judgement seen both in the forceful contrast between Adam and Eve's early innocence and their later awareness, and in the moving finale of the Great Deity's disgust and bewilderment at the sad outcome of the game.

The décor by James Goddard is perfectly in key with the work: as always with MacMillan ballet, it is an integral part of the action. The street costumes are gaudy abstractions of contemporary teenage fashion and the set, in which *The Financial Times* figures largely, is efficient. The cast are uniformly excellent: Doreen Wells and Richard Farley are touching as Adam and Eve, Elizabeth Anderton makes a riotous creature of the Serpent and Adrian Grater contrives to be a witty Apple.

Anastasia, 18 October 1976

There are times when one feels particularly grateful to The Royal Ballet, and more than usually proud of our national company. At galas, and grand occasions when the whole troupe is showing its paces, a certain chauvinistic complacency about its excellence may be in the general order of things, but at other times – as on Friday night at the opening of the ballet season – it is the sheer excellence of the troupe and the stature of both dancers and repertory that stirs the heart.

Anastasia was on the programme, and it looked more than ever the superb achievement that it is, and Lynn Seymour as the heroine more than ever the incomparable dancer that she is. At the end of the evening, when the drama is spent but still echoing in the mind, Kenneth MacMillan's extraordinary development of the three-act ballet assumes its true stature as one of the most important and innovative works in the entire contemporary repertory. It takes a nineteenth century convention – that of the big opera-house spectacular – and shows it as vivid, timeless poetically expressive.

The Soviets have laboured long and assiduously to make the full-length ballet relevant to a twentieth-century political and social aesthetic – from *The Red Poppy*, that first statement about the ideals in Russia during the 1920s, to Grigorovich's recent *Spartacus* and *Ivan the Terrible*. With *Anastasia* MacMillan has shown, without seeming effort, how the big ballet can speak of this century's history in this century's terms. And in so doing he has produced a work crammed with beautiful dancing that treats of the most serious matters: about social change; about human suffering; about those very problems of 'identity' that have so intrigued our age.

The scale and range of each of the ballet's three acts are remarkable. Act 1 starts gently: the world of the Russian Imperial family is almost untroubled, the high point of the action coming with the Tsarevich's tumble as he runs across the stage. But as the act ends, history's shadows have fallen across the family whom we have magically come to know and understand – from the tomboyish Grand Duchess Anastasia to the vacillating Tsar.

With the second act, the isolation of the aristocracy from the 'reality' of the proletariat and the sexual tensions within the Tsar's

circle have also been made clear. And all this is shown to us through the innocent gaze of Anastasia herself – a crucial point in understanding MacMillan's structural devices.

With Act 3, the world of the two previous acts has been utterly destroyed. Chaikovsky gives way to Martinu, Imperial Petersburg to Berlin, and the tenuous threads that link us to that vanished world are Anna Anderson's own convictions about her identity. It is now that we can see in their proper perspective the incidents of the previous acts – *Anastasia* only makes full sense after a second viewing, understood from prior experience of Anna Anderson's plight and beliefs. Anna/Anastasia drags us with her through the labyrinths of memory, of duplications of character and incident, and at the last we believe (with her) the truth about herself.

Guided by Miss Seymour's incandescent performance on Friday, every step of Anastasia's spiritual and physical journey was beautiful. On purely technical terms this is an amazing incarnation of a role. The child of Act 1, the young woman of Act 2, are infinitely touching beings; the tormented woman of Act 3 does not ask for our sympathy, she seizes it as her right, and here Miss Seymour scales those heights of artistic greatness that are unknown and unapproachable to most dancers. And at every moment Miss Seymour is sustained by the company's playing.

The grace and technical brilliance of the cast in the first scene, the sensitivity of dramatic reading (Derek Rencher as the Tsar; Georgina Parkinson as the Tsarina, are outstanding); the grandeur of the social dances in Act 2 and the tension generated by David Adams as Anna's husband in Act 3, merit every superlative. Two novelties in the production must be noted: Robert Jude's exceptional debut as Rasputin – strong, boldly drawn, absolutely credible – and a welcome troupe of coryphées to frame the Kshessinskaya divertissement in the ballroom.

Anastasia is a magnificent ballet not just on choreographic terms, but because it asks for magnificence from its whole cast – and the Royal Ballet are magnificent in it.

Requiem, 1 December 1976

'This danced Requiem is dedicated to the memory of my friend and colleague John Cranko, director the Stuttgart Ballet.' Thus Kenneth MacMillan prefaces his newest ballet, given its first

performance in Stuttgart on Sunday night. MacMillan's score is the Requiem that Gabriel Fauré wrote in memory of his own father, a setting of part of the mass for the dead whose gravity reveals depths of belief without excessive dramatics or vehemence. It is music whose danced presentation MacMillan has long contemplated; focused now as a memorial to Cranko it gains an added poignancy as a tribute to a friend whose career ran parallel to MacMillan's.

The result is a major work, MacMillan at his most feeling, and most questioning about the potential of dance to express emotion. Yolanda Sonnabend has devised an austere stage picture: six square columns of misted glass rise into the flies, lit from above, with a white back-cloth and wings. The dancers, save for two principals, are in flesh-coloured tights, decorated on the trunk with striations and patterning that recall the musculature and veining of the body, reminiscent of drawings by Pavel Chelichev and William Blake.

Blake's drawings have also, I suspect, provided certain initial poses that MacMillan has developed to feed his dances – the drama implicit in Blake's figures in *Milton*, *Job*, *The Inferno* is exactly that which the choreography presents and extends through movement.

And just as Blake's piercing vision moved far beyond the conventional art of his time, so does MacMillan escape traditional pietism to seek something both directly communicative and powerful in the text of the Mass. His response to words has always been original (we have but to remember *Song of the Earth*, or *Romeo*, or *Images of Love*), and the prayers of the Requiem provide the most serious inspiration to date, not for literal translation into dance but as seeds that grow into movement inspired by their imagery.

The ballet begins with a shock. The cast, too numerous for me to count but including most of the company, shuffle on stage at the opening *Requiem aeternam*, fists raised heaven-wards in grief and supplication. It would be impossible for me to attempt any detailed account of the further action, especially after a single viewing, but the dance in each section is of great intensity, often novel, but never wilful in a search for the 'new'.

Marcia Haydee, her angelic nature suggested by a dress of white chiffon, is held high above this opening group and rolls to and fro on a sea of hands, and as the *Kyrie* ends there are five reclining

bodies on the stage while a central group remains caught in a supplicating pose.

The succeeding *Offertorium* finds Richard Cragun grieving and alone (he wears a simple loin-cloth, and looks very like Patinir's John the Baptist). To him comes Haydee as a hope of liberation from the pains of hell, and there follows a tender duet, echoed rather after the fashion of *Concerto's* middle movement by three other couples. But with the baritone solo at *Hostias et preces* Cragun is again alone, and the prayer for the redemption of the soul is exemplified in what is, for me, the most extraordinary sequence in the ballet: a solo in which his body is sometimes curled on the ground, then stretched in broad sweeps of energy in which Cragun's easy power of movement is beautifully used. At the recapitulation of the opening *Domine Jesu Christe*, Cragun kneels in supplication as the girls of the corps de ballet are carried on, as if in realisation of the prayer.

The *Sanctus* which follows opens with another shock: Haydee launches herself in a joyous leap into Reid Anderson's arms – the text's 'Heaven and Earth are full of Thy glory' radiant in visualisation – and with the closing *Hosannas* she seems to float beatifically, supported on the knees of the reclining Anderson. The *Pie Jesu* contains the most unusual writing in the ballet, with Haydee engendering a feeling of absolute trust and innocence as an angelic figure sometimes seated on the ground, or moving across the stage as if contemplating the earth far below. Unexpected in its outline, the dance yet seems completely in accord with the music and the prayer for eternal peace.

In the succeeding *Agnus Dei* Birgit Keil incarnates both the hope of peace and the sacrificial aspect of the Lamb. On the orchestral *tutte* that precede the choral *Requiem aeternam* she is held inverted above the stage, and this pose is resolved as Haydee again enters as the representation of consolation. The *Libera Me* is given to Egon Madsen and a group of men, their bodies flung and tossed by their contemplation of the day of wrath, and when Madsen is carried away, Haydee is borne behind him as the promise of redemption. The final *In Paradisum* finds Fauré's luminous writing matched at every point by MacMillan's serene evocation of paradisaical rest. The girls of the corps are brought in, floating high over the stage. The entire cast then walk to form a central group which divides in two as the stage is brilliantly illuminated by the radiance from above.

They stand motionless, then exit – some walking, others carried – while Haydee is lifted high and triumphant by Cragun and Anderson, suggesting the last feeling of eternal rest and peace.

These first impressions will, I hope, suggest something of a work in which MacMillan has sought, and found, physical expression for a musical masterpiece that is itself rooted in a deep personal belief in its text. The prayers of the Mass are not an excuse for music: for Fauré, in the particular circumstances of his father's death, and for MacMillan, in the no less special circumstances of remembering John Cranko (who in the post-war years when they were both embarking on their careers must have seemed like an elder brother), the text has deep significance. Terror in the face of death and the hope of heaven are not yet conventions, even in this unbelieving age. It is the ringing beauty of MacMillan's *Requiem* that can make us feel so much of the profound matter of the Mass for the Dead.

The ballet was gloriously danced by its principals and the corps – with Marcia Haydee and Richard Cragun outstanding even on their own magnificent terms. No less good the musical account under Stewart Kershaw.

History has an uncomfortable way of repeating itself, and if we wonder why it was necessary for an important work by the Director of the Royal Ballet to be staged abroad, we have but to think back eleven years to that other MacMillan achievement in Stuttgart – *Song of the Earth* – which only reached the stage thanks to John Cranko's enthusiasm and confidence in MacMillan's gifts. This new *Requiem* honours Cranko's memory in noblest fashion, and ironically reminds us of his belief in MacMillan yet again.

Mayerling, 17 February, 20 February,
23 February 1978

The tragedy at Mayerling in 1889 is best known to us through the cinema versions, which have cheapened and sentimentalised a mysterious incident that seemed a terrible symptom of the degeneracy of the Austro-Hungarian empire. In his new three-act *Mayerling* for the Royal Ballet, Kenneth MacMillan has made use of the cinema's procedures while resolutely deromanticising its view of events. By inviting the novelist Gillian Freeman to provide

him with a scenario he has benefited from her understanding of script-writing for films to create a fluidly cinematic form, making use of the equivalent of the camera's 'dissolves' and swift narrative devices. At the same time he has rejected the popular, cinema-bred idea of the Crown Prince Rudolf and Mary Vetsera as a grander, Viennese, Romeo and Juliet, to show us something much nearer the historical and psychological truth of the characters.

In *Mayerling* MacMillan returns to a major concern of his large-scale choreography: the reshaping and developing of the form of the three-act ballet, moving away from nineteenth century structure and its conventional fantasy figures, to forge a manner able to deal with the harsher realism suited to late twentieth century taste. (An interesting case can be made out for seeing *Mayerling* as *Swan Lake* 100 years on: love in death, royal duty, emotional instability are common to Prince Siegfried and to Prince Rudolf.) *Anastasia* suggested MacMillan's way ahead, as a study of a real woman caught at a moment of crisis; as in Grigorovich's *Spartacus*, and more especially his *Ivan the Terrible*, the stuff of history nurtures the development of ballet, and substitutes fact for convenient fiction.

The result, in *Mayerling*, is a tense, searing ballet in which a tragic figure is seen in his very special and dramatically fascinating social setting, his motives and his psychology explored in dances of rare power, his destiny explained in terms of political, family and social pressures. The central character of Rudolf is not a new one in MacMillan's ballets. He is the outcast, the victim, whom we know as the girl in *The Invitation*, Anastasia/Anna Anderson, *Rite's* Chosen Virgin, Juliet, the younger brother in *Triad* – all driven to isolation or death by events they cannot or will not control. But Rudolf is the most complex, and most fully extended in analysis, and as a result the ballet provides what I assume to be the lengthiest role yet created for a male dancer – more demanding even than *Spartacus* or *Ivan the Terrible*. And be it said it straight away that as Rudolf David Wall is superb: in the role of a life-time he gives the performance of a life-time.

The ballet charts the eight years which begin with Rudolf's loveless marriage to Princess Stephanie of Belgium, barely out of the school-room, and which culminate in the double shooting at his Hunting Lodge at Mayerling where he first kills Mary Vetsera (his mistress of but two weeks) and then ends his own life. *Mayerling's* hero is never heroic, but he wins all our sympathy, and

this without distorting historical fact. His every demand upon his parents rejected, he turns to a life of compulsive womanising and to debauchery – the Rudolf who lies dead at the ballet's end is venereally diseased, a morphine addict, a Prince trapped in political and sexual intrigue, a gun-fetishist obsessed with the idea of death, heir to a throne which cannot be his for years to come. And unlikely as it may seem, MacMillan and Wall show him as a man infinitely pitiable, authentically tragic.

To achieve a portrait of such depth and resonance, the action follows Rudolf's journey to Mayerling by way of the claustrophobic, faction-ridden court of the Hapsburgs (Nicholas Georgiadis' settings are admirable in catching the enclosed and stuffy world of the Hofburg, as, too, a seedy tavern and the Vetsera house). Central to the development of the character is a sequence of duets for Rudolf with the women in his life, and in them MacMillan's mastery of the pas de deux has never seemed more complete. In none of them is there a suggestion of conventional romantic love; rather does each stress the isolated lovelessness that drives Rudolf deeper into despair.

We see him with his mother, the Empress Elizabeth, a role in which Georgina Parkinson (Gertrude to his Hamlet) superbly conveys a frigid reluctance to become involved with Rudolf's plight. The wedding night encounter with his new bride is illuminated by Wendy Ellis's beautiful sensitivity as a girl terrified and brutalised; earlier we find Rudolf flirting cruelly with his young sister-in-law at a wedding-ball: Genesia Rosato showing promise of fine things here. We watch him take Stephanie to a louche tavern where he returns to a liaison with his mistress, Mitzi Caspar, a role exultantly taken by Laura Connor.

And recurring throughout the ballet is the woman who seems crucial to his unhappiness, the Countess Larisch: one-time mistress, now a procuress and evil genius, she is yet the only person who offers him any understanding or sympathy. As Larisch Merle Park gives a performance that uses her best qualities to the full: danced with dazzling bravura, acted with brilliant assurance, the role glitters with life as bright as the diamonds Larisch wears – it is a wonderful creation. To Lynn Seymour falls the role of Mary Vetsera, and she brings to it a luscious physical presence as a girl recklessly in love with the idea of love. In the duets for Rudolf and Mary, MacMillan is at his most persuasive as an erotic poet,

exploring passion with images of extreme beauty – the final coupling at *Mayerling* marvellously combining lust and despair.

As a setting and explanation for this core of pas de deux MacMillan has provided big set pieces: a grand and magnificently organised set of waltzes at the Hofburg, a birthday party for Franz Joseph, and a boisterous tavern scene. At every moment in them the artists of the Royal Ballet are at their best: in secondary roles Michael Coleman, Stephen Beagley, Michael Batchelor and Derek Deane revel in the ardours of variations for a group of Hungarian officers and Graham Fletcher makes a fine showing as a cab-driver used by Rudolf. And at the ballet's heart is David Wall. From his earliest performances as a very young and very gifted premier danseur Wall knew how to hold the stage. Now in his maturity he demonstrates a marvellous authority. He has the strength, both emotional and physical, for this unique role. Tireless throughout a most taxing sequence of pas de deux, assured in solos, he has entered into the soul of the crown Prince; the degeneration of Rudolf's character is displayed with terrible inevitability.

His most remarkable moment for me is one of complete immobility. At a party in the Hofburg, Franz Joseph's mistress, the singer Katherina Schratt (Bernadette Greevy), entertains the courtiers with song. Rudolf stands slightly apart, motionless and seething with emotion at his mother's behaviour and his own impotence: it is a measure of Wall's greatness in the role that we sense all Rudolf's sadness – the tears he dare not shed are plain to see.

The score for *Mayerling* is assembled from the music of Liszt, skilfully arranged by John Lanchbery. There are moments when it seems too fragmentary, but it everywhere sustains the danced action. Georgiadis' designs, as I have indicated, are most effective and his costumes combine historical verisimilitude with balletic suitability. I have seen *Mayerling* twice – at Tuesday's gala and again on Wednesday at the official première – and it revealed far more of itself at a second viewing. At the risk of seeming a ticket-tout I would urge audiences to see it twice; the intricacies of plotting are not difficult, but the richness of texture becomes even more rewarding when seen a second time. There are some cuts which will inevitably need to be made, but these are slight, and the ballet stands as a fascinating and innovative development with MacMillan. Wall and the entire cast meriting every praise. So,

too does IBM International, whose generosity made the ballet possible: industrial sponsorship of the arts in these had time is of inestimable public benefit.

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On Friday night there came the first change of cast in *Mayerling*, Wayne Eagling leading a new group of principals as a palely haunted, nervously intense Rudolf. With his beautiful style (beautiful in its speed, musicality, largeness and ease of articulation, and clear musculature: one can see how movement develops, how energy is born and expends itself) Eagling is an artist who can justify a role merely by his dancing. This is the case with his Solor, his Florimund. In dramatic ballets he needs incident to fire his imagination; his Romeo and des Grieux have a density of emotional texture which I do not find in his account of the more static role of Siegfried in *Swan Lake*.

Thus the Crown Prince Rudolf is well suited to his gifts, and his view of the part on Friday night, if understandably a first sketch, was given a magnificent dynamic impetus which took Eagling without apparent trouble from the opening wedding celebration to the final suicide. The dancing was thrilling – I admired especially the cutting neurotic edge which he gave to certain of the big scenes: the duet with Stephanie, the variation in the tavern, the tormented solo with Elizabeth in the Hofburg, showed character exactly expressed – and he suggested all the corroding loneliness that drives Rudolf further and further along the way to the Hunting Lodge.

What was underplayed, and seems to me crucial to Rudolf's character, was the sexual force of the last scene with Mary Vetsera. Wall/Seymour make physical passion a fevered manifestation of the *folie à deux* that consumes the lovers; Eagling and Lesley Collier (the Vetsera of the performance) miss something of the hysterical abandon that should mark their farewell to passion and to life. Further performances will also enable Eagling to explore the long moment of immobility in the Hofburg party scene – the still eye of Rudolf's storm – when, during the second and third stanzas of the song, we must be able to 'read' the Prince's face. (I am not persuaded that the beard Rudolf wears suits Eagling here.) But at every other moment Eagling is the true focus of the action: his performance touched with an introspective pathos even at his most desperate and ferocious moments. It is a very fine achievement.

A second cast, taking over major roles so soon after a première, must inevitably suffer from comparison with performances freshly made and still fresh to an audience. It is for this reason, perhaps, that I found depths 'of characterisation are as yet unplumbed by Vergie Derman and Ann Jenner as Elizabeth of Austria and Countess Larisch.

Lesley Collier's Mary has all the fresh eagerness the role needs, and she manages its girlish extravagance with complete conviction. But like MacMillan's Juliet, Mary must awaken to sexual feeling and respond vividly to it: at this first performance Collier's crystal-line dancing seemed too pure, too virginal for the final burst of eroticism that preceded her death.

The production has now played itself into the theatre, and it has, for me, gained in speed. A section which I have heard described as a 'longueur' – the Emperor's birthday party with its song – I think essential in that it allows Rudolf to reveal a great deal about himself. Cuts are needed: the snow-scene; the tavern sequence; a reprise of the opening waltz (splendidly organised though it is) are over-extended. What remains rather more puzzling is the awkwardness of certain scene changes: there are long moments spent staring at a darkened front cloth, a mis-judged lighting cue at the end of the penultimate duet of the ballet when we *must* be allowed to see the faces of the lovers, the all-too-visible way the set is stuck after the suicide – these need reassessment by the stage management. But as a ballet *Mayerling* grips the imagination and tightens its hold with successive viewings: editing will but sharpen its impact still further.

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'Surely he speaks.' Thus a Danish poet hailed August Bournonville's expressive dramatic playing, and I can do no better than echo these words to praise Stephen Jefferies' performance on Tuesday night as Crown Prince Rudolf. It is some measure of *Mayerling's* grand qualities that it can invite interpretations as different, and as valid, as those of David Wall, Wayne Eagling and Stephen Jefferies. It is some measure of the Royal Ballet's grand qualities that it can provide three such artists, so well able to shape the drama and sustain a role as massive and arduous as that of Rudolf. I have now seen the ballet five times and, perhaps because one tends to enter into a kind of love-affair with a new work of art, I am less inclined to find fault with it by picking upon minor

matters for revision, than to hail its excellence of over-all planning and choreography, and rejoice in the detail which makes it so 'real' and engrossing an experience.

It is the reality of Jefferies' interpretation, its total identification with the character of Rudolf its power, that made me feel that his debut on Tuesday was the most emotionally moving account of the role thus far. After the opening scene at the Hofburg, in which Jefferies caught all the strain and anguish of the young Prince, I muttered to my companion: 'He's superb, but he'll never be able to keep up the pace.' I was wrong. Jefferies was superb throughout, and the pace was not only maintained, but increased. The result was a dramatic performance that will stand comparison with anything I have seen in the London theatre for some years past.

What Jefferies does so well is to show all the tensions that Rudolf feels: the recurrent gesture in which he clutches his head as if it is bursting seems clinically terrifying. His relationship with each woman in his life becomes a cry for help; Jefferies persuades us that Rudolf is a man living in a nightmare, and that the world he sees is almost hallucinatory at times. Thrilling the moment when Mary Vetsera (Alfreda Thorogood, very fine in the role) enters his apartments for the first time. As she seizes first the skull and then the gun, we sense how she must seem like an angel of death to Rudolf, the mysterious incarnation of his fantasies about love and fate. Miss Thorogood contrives to make Mary's innocence seem coolly erotic; her dancing is exquisite in line and finesse, and its emotional poignancy most touching in the last scenes. (The contrast with the neurotic vehemence of Jefferies' playing makes for fine theatre.)

Jefferies' impersonation of Rudolf is also the most Oedipal thus far: between the twin poles of his rejected love for his mother and his ardent temperament's quest for a substitute love, he is trapped and damned from the very start of the ballet. With Larisch (a most sensitive portrait from Sandra Conley) there are moments when he can be himself – and there came an inspired piece of improvisation when a jewel fell to the ground and Jefferies made excellent dramatic capital by flinging it back. With his mother and wife, Jefferies is infinitely piteous, whether in anger or in despair. The closest scene with Monica Mason's powerful Elisabeth was heart-rending; the wedding night with Denise Nunn's delicate, bemused and very appealing Stephanie had a fine edge of hysteria.

If we weep for Jefferies' Rudolf – and there is no shame in being moved by playing of this calibre – we must delight in the artistic stature of the artist, and of the whole company. In *Mayerling* the Royal Ballet shows itself as a great company at full stretch and the entire ensemble deserves every praise.

My Brother, My Sisters, 7 June 1978

Kenneth MacMillan's newest work – made for the Stuttgart Ballet a fortnight ago – received its London première on Monday night. Its title, *My Brother, My Sisters*, tells us about its cast; a quotation in the programme from *The Rack*, by A. E. Ellis, indicates that the family inhabits a world obsessed by the awareness of death. But, and here is the characteristic MacMillan twist, the family is also an isolated one, five sisters and a brother 'set apart by landscape and circumstance, intelligence and passion' as MacMillan states in his programme note.

These factors are immediately clear. Yolanda Sonnabend had provided a beautiful, brooding setting, to suggest moorland. When we first see the family they are plainly bookish, gazing into the palms of their hands as if reading obsessively; their sexuality is heightened – and explicitly shown – by games which are incestuous and murderous play that becomes frighteningly real. Like Cocteau's *Enfants Terribles*, they inhabit a world of self-perpetuating fantasy; like the Brontës the girls revolve around the figure of the brother; like those several macabre news-stories that have come to light across the years, they become involved in relationships that develop into a kind of *folie à six*. But they are also figments from the past, for throughout the action of the ballet – which is set to Schoenberg's *Five pieces for orchestra*, and the Webern *Five Pieces* and *Six Pieces* – a ghostly observer (Reid Anderson, excellently chill and remote) gazes at them, passes among them.

Action is focused on three of the children: on Birgit Keil, eldest and most dominant; on Lucia Montagnon, bespectacled and her rival; and on Richard Cragun as the brother who goads the girls on, and is the chief object of their affections. Jean Allenby, Sylviane Bayard and Hilde Koch as the other sisters serve more as chorus and accessories after the fact. The events of the piece are the games of love and death, fantasies of passion and killing, in which the.

group reveals adult aggressions and lusts. What we see may be play, but it also argues the problem of what is fact and what is imagination – Birgit Keil makes love to the supposedly dead body of her brother; but she does in fact kill Lucia Montagnon and, snatching off her glasses, starts insanely to ‘become’ her sister. The text of the ballet is very complex, all the more so because MacMillan hides nothing, and – analyst once again to his characters – shows how ritual and reality become inseparable to the figures in case histories like these.

Fascinating though the themes of *My Brother, My Sisters* are, the piece would be no more than a psychiatrist’s toy were it not that MacMillan has evolved a language of extraordinary originality and excitement in which to explore the situation. The ballet begins rather predictably – I feel that the opening Schoenberg score has not fired the choreographer’s imagination – but with the sparer and more allusive textures of the two Webern suites, MacMillan’s ideas take wing, and we are treated to innovative dances in which a highly personal language emerges, entirely apt to reveal the inner recesses of these extraordinary psyches.

For Cragun (whom, in passing, I must hail again as one of the greatest dancers of our time, and one wearing his greatness with a beautiful humility: ‘self’ never enters into his dancing; his grand gifts serve only the choreography) there are solos of breath-taking novelty. He whirls in extraordinary twisting leaps in which one hand holds a foot; he spins prodigiously; revels in complexities of dynamics, and shows the dance without the least effort. From Birgit Keil there comes a characterisation at once fey and passionate, vicious and beguiling, wonderfully danced. Lucia Montagnon gives something sullen, pitiable and oddly watchful to the rival sister; the other girls are no less good.

And as the ballet progresses, the sense of chill unease, of unhappy mystery is heightened by two *coups de théâtre*. In the first the girls put on doll-like half-masks, and dance while mouthing words; later they and Cragun return in transparent masks to mock the bespectacled Montagnon. The effects are profoundly disquieting, macabre.

I do not know if *My Brother, My Sisters* will become a ‘popular’ ballet; but its combination of action on two narrative levels, in that what we see at first glance is doubled by another and even more uneasy ‘inner’ narration, grips the mind, and demonstrates yet

again MacMillan's mastery as a choreographer able to explore the convolutions of the human psyche in exciting movement.

The other MacMillan piece in the programme was *Song of the Earth*, danced with the assurance that Stuttgart alone can bring to it. Despite a dreadful setting – an ill-hung back-drop is inexcusable – the company performed with total conviction. This comes, I suspect, from their understanding of the sung text, which seems to permeate all the interpretations. Marcia Haydee, Egon Madsen and Richard Cragun led the performance with absolute authority; Cragun's moment of terror when he is impelled forward by the Messenger (the contralto soloist has just returned for the final sung section of the score) was dancing of the greatest beauty.

Patrice Montagnon's *Innere Not* was also featured in the evening. Montagnon is another young Stuttgart choreographer, concerning himself here with the adagio of Bruckner's seventh symphony and what he supposes is the composer's *Inner Need*. Béjart seems his model, and despite some fine grouping, I was not persuaded that the clogged choreographic texture did much for Bruckner or his symphony; or that an awkward set by Axel Manthey did anything for the ballet.

Anastasia, 21 July 1978

Anastasia's return to the repertory at the Opera House reminds us how good a case can be made out for considering the Royal Ballet as a company of dramatic dancers without peer today. The recent London Weekend Television programme about *Mayerling* contained lengthy passages from a complete recording of a performance.

Close-up camera shots revealed just how detailed and excellently judged were the central performances, and no less so the involvement of a large cast in the dramatic action: there was an almost cinematic verismo in playing which yet managed to, project to the furthest points of Covent Garden. This style of dramatic playing is the product of the exceptional demands made by both Ashton and MacMillan in their narrative pieces – and of these *Anastasia* stands in a very special place.

I think it so glorious a ballet that I am prepared to forgive its few longueurs: the still lightweight manoeuvring of the naval contingent in the last scene of Act 1; the over-long exploration of

the Imperial Family's sexual tensions during the ball in Act 2. In all other moments it compels belief, admiration and respect, as a brave and brilliant extension of the full-length narrative ballet, and also as an opportunity for a great dancer – Lynn Seymour – to show us what interpretive genius is in the ballet theatre.

It should not be forgotten that the work must be understood from Anastasia's view-point: it is her world we are shown; her feelings which colour the actions of the cast. Because the Russian Imperial Family has so special an identity for us, as a group doomed, and as a portent of what was to happen in much of Europe, Anastasia's world becomes not merely a fantasy, but an insight into how historical events were to affect many people. The quest for identity, which lies at the heart of the ballet, is one that obsesses our society still.

And how cleverly MacMillan leads us through the tale, Obedient to his score, he provides a light, dance-filled texture for Act 1, whose most piercing moment – the Tsarevich's fall – is played at little more than a mezzo-forte. Act 2, more emotionally clouded, and darker in manner, is less clear in its focus on Anastasia itself, and concentrates rather on the courtly society waltzing into the abyss. In Act 3, Seymour comes into her own, giving a performance last night of thrilling power, and extraordinary richness of inflexion: the sequence in which her child is taken from her, and she is then rejected by the survivors of the Imperial Family, and attempts to drown herself, was phenomenal in its expressive dignity.

The figure who, at the end, circles the stage on her hospital bed, sure at last of her identity, is so compelling that we too believe she is Anastasia: great art can do no more. The entire company performance was magnificent.

Soirée MacMillan, 28 November 1978

The gala audience assembled for the first performance of the Opéra's *Soirée MacMillan* must have wondered what kind of elaborate cross-Channel jape had been played on them as the curtain fell on *Les Quatre Saisons*. This was the opening piece in a triple bill in which MacMillan has been honoured as the first Briton to provide an entire ballet evening at the Opéra. The idea of starting with a revised version of *The Four Seasons* was excellent:

Les Vêpres Siciliennes of 1855 was Verdi's first commission from the Opéra; his ballet music (which is MacMillan's score) was a sop to win over the *abonnés* more interested in legs than vocal chords; MacMillan's *divertissement* is full of good dances, and in re-working the initial ballabile the choreographer has tightened what was the weakest section of a charming work.

For design he turned to Barry Kay, and curtain rise showed the vastness of the Opéra's stage, amusingly set with pillars, huge plastic bubbles to simulate clouds, and four seasonal divinities skied high above the dance area on *gloires*. The audience applauded; the conceit was easy to read – a homage to the Second Empire's view of *le grand siècle*. There followed jokes within decorative jokes: puns about the style of the Opéra itself, and more than a nod to the extravagance we associate with the *Folies Bergère*. But it is dangerous to make fun (however well-meant) about a nation's foibles and then offer the fun for that nation's amusement. The house perceptibly froze as Kay's fantasies – very entertaining in themselves – piled feathers on feathers, wigs and golden trappings on yet more feathers and visual puns about balletic costume.

I feel that MacMillan's dances have now fallen twice victim to their design. Presented, as Balanchine offers his gleaming *Ballo della Regina* *divertissement* to Verdi's *Don Carlos* music, in the simplest costuming, the choreography could speak for itself and win an audience. But both Peter Rice's domestic Italian decorations for the Royal Ballet's staging, and Barry Kay's new Pelion on Ossa of plumes, fauns, centaurs, amazons and sight gags mitigate against the self-sufficient sparkle of the dances. Kay evidently felt that the Opéra itself – a building which in any case goes far too far, but does so with the deepest conviction – could provide design themes that could go even further too far. Impossible not to admire his skill, his witty sense of the decoratively preposterous in late nineteenth century taste which, in the Opéra's own foyer de la danse, seems a *grande horizontale's* idea of Parnassus. Yet in *Les Quatre Saisons* the transvestite Venus attended by a cohort of fan-dancers; the Bacchus entering astride a car that reveals itself as an immense tribute to the male genitalia; the gauzy skirts hugging the danseuses' derrières with a dainty eroticism that can be seen in the building's own statuary; all proved too much. And too much for the dances, which floundered not least because the Opéra's artists seemed ill at ease in their outfits. Three dancers managed to shine from

among a large cast, The prodigious Noella Pontois, a brilliant virtuoso dancer, spun and sparkled in Autumn; the Opéra's new young star. Patrick Dupond, displayed amazing ballon and elevation as he flew through the Spring variation; an entrancing newcomer, Françoise Legrée was of truly spring-like grace in the same section.

As the curtain fell the house showed all too vocally how disgruntled it was. Had Albion revealed itself as more perfidious than even the most xenophobic had believed? MacMillan's new *Métaboles* started to assuage the public's displeasure. The score is a fine study in the metamorphosis of orchestral ideas by Henri Dutilleux. Barry Kay produced a theatrical and disturbing setting from a semi-circle of oval looking glasses dominated by a cloth showing a gigantic chest X-ray. At a dining table five men are seated, tail-coated, with Patrice Bart as their leader. Dominique Khalfouni, in a long dress the colour of raspberry sorbet – which is torn off to reveal a maillot of the same hue – is their *plat du jour*. MacMillan prefaces the work with a quotation from The Ballad of Reading Gaol (Yet each man kills the thing he loves ...) and we see Khalfouni as the repast for Bart and his companions. As in *La Grande Bouffe*, or the dinner scene in the film of *Tom Jones*, eating and eroticism are correlated. And as the audience discovered, *Métaboles* generated an obsessive emotional force. MacMillan uses an almost expressionistic manner at times (the men mime-eating, with hands rising and falling like pistons over the table) and the neurotic, erotic mood becomes very tense. Khalfouni and Bart were both excellent: Khalfouni, a pallid victim enjoying her fate, gave her role a morbid sensuality as she was manhandled in a variety of acrobatic/passionate lifts: Bart's speed and impetuosity of temperament made the central male role as disquieting as that of the lunatic teacher in Flindt's *La Leçon*.

At *Métaboles* curtain-fall the audience had forgiven, if not forgotten, *Les Quatre Saisons*; after the final *Song of the Earth* they were aware that they had seen a masterpiece. The programme was far too long, and not helped by interminable intervals, but *Song* received a fine performance, and on the grand expanse of the Opéra stage it looks magnificent. There was a sound orchestral performance under Stewart Kershaw – the playing for the Verdi and Dutilleux scores had been admirable – though I was not taken by singing of the female vocalist in the Mahler. *Song* was domi-

nated, and made particularly glorious, by the dancing of Jean Guizerix as the Man. Guizerix, as I have had occasion to note before, is an artist of the rarest distinction, blessed with a powerful style and emotional intensity, ideally expressive, virile – one of the great dancers of our time. As the Man he gives the most potent account of this difficult role I have seen, serious, thrilling in dignity and in dynamic range. The balance with the Woman (taken by the gifted and sensitively restrained Wilfride Piollet) was excellently judged, and I suspect that the last song gained much from the fact that these artists are man and wife. Their concentration made *The Farewell* very moving, and Piollet's technical ease – exquisite in such small steps as the sequence of little beats in the final song – was a continuing joy. As *The Messenger*, Patrick Dupond was impressive. His extreme youth and his darting style gave the part an innocence that was markedly effective. In the two scherzi – *Of Youth* and *Of Beauty* – a pair of beautiful young dancers, Françoise Legrée and Clotilde Vayer – were perfectly cast. How pleasant it would be were there an entente cordiale between the Opéra and Covent Garden so that artists in leading roles might exchange visits. Guizerix and his fellows deserve to be seen and hailed in London.

La Fin du Jour, 16 March 1979

It is Kenneth MacMillan week at the Opera House, with the entire repertory made up of his ballets. It was more especially a MacMillan celebration last night, with the first performance of his new *La Fin du Jour* in a triple bill, and the presentation by Princess Margaret of the Evening Standard Ballet Award to the choreographer at the end of the evening. A happy occasion: showers of daffodils to thank MacMillan for *Mayerling* and his other ballets last year, and the hero of the evening, characteristically modest, deflecting our gratitude to the dancers who make his ballets possible.

La Fin du Jour is set to the Ravel G major piano concerto, a work made in 1931, which the composer at first considered calling *Divertissement*. This alternative title, and the date of the score, are keys to what MacMillan has brought magnificently off in a poetic, allusive choreography. He offers us a series of photographs of the 1930s that might have come from the pages of *The Sketch* or *The*

Illustrated London News – figures caught in the amber of time, sportsmen and women, cinema idols, matinée stars, intrepid aviatrixes, seen in that innocent, bright light before the night of the Second World War fell.

It is not a literal portrait. The work's poetry comes from the skilled juxtaposition of elements of play that we, from the other side of the abyss of the war, know was doomed, as was the society that nurtured it. Ian Spurling the designer, has provided yet another extraordinary series of costumes that refine, exaggerate and pinpoint all the social attitudes of the decade: light, clear colours; extreme silhouettes, a mad-cap elegance that is somehow pathetic in retrospect.

In the first movement of the concerto we see a corps de ballet of marionette figures, who frame a double pas de deux for Merle Park and Julian Hosking, Jennifer Penney and Wayne Eagling. The two women are at first bathers; the men golfers, and Macmillan has created for them choreography of the greatest ingenuity, with a frozen chic as they suddenly pause in almost hieratic poses.

Here, as throughout the work, Macmillan's invention is prodigal: from the demotic of games, from the photographic images of periodicals of the time, he has wrought a language of remarkable beauty. Merle Park swings lower and lower in an arc from Hosking's arms; Eagling, in a stunning solo, leaps and falls; everywhere, there is a response to Ravel's orchestral textures, so that Park and Penney seem to be bathing in the shimmering sonorities of the music.

The slow movement with its serene cantilena (that Constant Lambert called 'a synthetic melody') becomes a long-breathed adagio for Park and Penney each attended by five men. MacMillan's choreographic device here is a ravishing canon in which the two voices slowly catch up with each other, then separate again, while the women are lifted and at one moment seem carried over the stage in chairs made from their cavaliers. But the continuity suddenly breaks as the women again freeze in poses, and the final section finds them alone, eddying over the stage, linked in a *pas de bourrée* which has as emotive an effect as the great stream of *bourrées* for the Woman that comes near the end of the last song in *Lied von der Erde*.

For the last movement, the cast are in evening dress. Park and Penney are now Jean Harlow and Jessie Matthews and Ginger

Rogers and those other darlings of the time; the men in pastel tail suits, soar and roar across the stage, the choreography impelling them in grand spans of movement. And at the last, dusk falls on the garden which we see through an opening in Ian Spurling's creamy setting (which is in fact a series of watchful profiles), and Merle Park pulls a door shut to close out the night. The party is over.

I think *La Fin du Jour* a ballet far richer than it first seems, richer even than the prodigious outpouring of choreography which so stimulates the eye, and so stimulates the dancers. The piece is magnificently performed by Merle Park and Jennifer Penney, Julian Hosking and Wayne Eagling (whose thrilling physical abilities and 'cool' temperament are superbly displayed). It may seem frivolous, quirky at moments. It certainly does not presume to impose any political attitudinising upon the refinement of the Ravel score. It makes its points by hints, quick suggestions, but it does so with consummate sensitivity. It is a requiem for the *douceur de vivre* of an era, and it is nostalgically grateful for the 1930's wayward charm.

The rest of the programme – *Diversions* and *Elite Syncopations* – fell victim to industrial troubles at Covent Garden; no set changes; minimal lighting. *Diversions* suffered, and I will report on it when it can be seen properly. *Elite* was given insouciant gaiety by a wonderful cast, who took the opportunity for some splendid improvisation.

Playground, 29 August 1979

Kenneth MacMillan's new *Playground* for Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet finds the choreographer working at his most intense in studying the human psyche. The ballet is a disquieting piece making no concessions to conventional attitudes of airiness and bodies beautiful. Instead, it offers distress and violence of spirit; yet because it treats of a human condition without romanticising or fudging its subject, it also achieves a harsh uncompromising beauty. The classic dance is taken a further step along a path of truthful precision in revealing depths of feeling and suffering.

The playground of the title is a brave naturalistic design by Yolanda Sonnabend, a wire-meshed courtyard more prison than place for games. Behind it we see the walls of an institution with

barred windows and a mural of caricatured figures. At curtain-rise, we see the inmates of a mental hospital grotesquely got up as children, their games making a macabre comment upon their wounded personalities. As with the television play last year, the device of adult performers cast as children sharpens the implications of grown-up relationships. In *Playground* the fantasy achieves a further dimension since some of these supposed children are also playing at being adults, and all are commenting upon their inadequacies by reverting to an irrational childishness. Certain figures stand out: a vicar (Stephen Wicks); his wife (Judith Rowann); a girl who daubs herself with make-up (Marion Tait); another inmate who assumes the identity of the girl's mother (Siobhan Stanley).

Their play-acting is dislocated, and informed by that satiric observation that is sometimes found in the activities of the mentally distressed. Outside the enclosure a young man (Desmond Kelly) watches, then enters the playground. For all his apparent normality, we sense, through Kelly's remarkable interpretation, the violence that is suppurating just below the surface of his personality.

He is attracted to the girl, and they embark upon a *pas de deux* which conveys the extreme tension of their feelings. The girl is driven through excitement into an epileptic fit – a haunting choreographic tour de force – and her collapse occasions another game as her companions mourn over her apparently dead body.

The young man is attacked by the rest of the cast. At this, three white-coated doctors enter and the man is restrained in a strait-jacket. Playtime is over. The patients doff their children's clothes, put on institutional garb and leave. The girl is the last to go. In a scene done with unforgettable pathos by Marion Tait, she stands, riven with grief, hands drawn down her tear-stained face to smear the make-up that has been her erstwhile identity. She trails away. Kelly, strait-jacketed, lies abandoned as the playground gate closes. Kneeling, head against the gate, he seems like Petrushka beating against the door of his cell.

I saw *Playground* at both its performances at the week's end, and I record that it is heart-rending as well as disquieting. It is sustained, inspired, by an exceptionally theatrical score from Gordon Crosse, the *Play Ground* which he wrote for the Hallé Orchestra two years ago. It is music taut in spirit, varied in

emotional colour, and ideal as partner in this drama of the mind.

MacMillan's style owes something to the manner of his *My Brother, My Sisters*, but *Playground* is even darker in mood though warmed by a compassion for the human derelicts it studies. The reverberance of the characters and their relationships makes the piece far superior to any mere observation of madness. It is not shocking for the sake of sensationalism, and it never sinks into the sentimentality of the film *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Our understanding of the characters is 'free'. I incline to the view of Kelly as the most chilling figure, a maniac who escapes from confinement for a brief, dangerous and piteous moment, an Orpheus whose descent into Hell is permanent.

I suspect that the choreographer intends the seemingly rational figures of the doctors to be other inmates. The aspect of group-therapy in the behaviour of the rest is obvious, but fascinating by reason of the levels of role-playing which take them increasingly far from reality.

At a time when the SWRB has never seemed a more cohesive ensemble, every praise is merited by the entire cast. Siobhan Stanley, Stephen Wicks, Judith Rowann are very fine. Desmond Kelly magnificently suggests the menace and sadness of the young man's personality; and Marion Tait is confirmed as the most gifted dramatic ballerina the Royal Ballet now possesses. In *Playground* she gives a performance in which sensitivity of expression in dance and acting wonderfully combine.

Gloria, 14 March and 17 March 1980

Death and the after-life has been an inspiration for Kenneth MacMillan's choreography since the early *Journey* which he made for American Ballet Theatre over twenty years ago. Two major works of his maturity, *Das Lied von der Erde* and *Requiem*, have shown how potent is the response which this theme excites in his choreography. Now, in a setting at the Poulenc *Gloria* which received its first performance last night, MacMillan returns to this same subject, to magnificent effect.

The immediate pretext for the work is that lost generation who felt the full brunt of the First World War. As programme note MacMillan quotes a poem by Vera Brittain from *Testament of Youth*.

The crucial lines which help fix the mood of *Gloria* run: 'But in that song we heard no warning chime, / nor visualised in hours benign and sweet / The threatening woe that our adventurous feet / Would starkly meet.'

The fine setting by Andy Klunder, recently graduated from the Slade School, is a skeletal metal frame placed on a rising slope of ground. The cast appear, breasting this slope. They are revenants, the girls ghost-grey, the men in tights that seem rotted, vestigial uniforms, and wearing tin hats.

The ballet's progress is a contemplation of lost hopes, lost joys, lost selves. And as so often with MacMillan, the evocation of the past – *Anastasia*; *La fin du jour* – is a matter of fixing feeling and attitudes rather than of a superficial naturalism. The choreography uses a large cast, but is centred upon a trio – Jennifer Penney, Wayne Eagling, Julian Hosking – and a quartet in which Anthony Dowson, Ross MacGibbon and Ashley Page support Wendy Ellis. There is no identification of relationships, though *Testament of Youth* may suggest certain parallels, and the true importance of the ballet lies in the thrillingly inventive, rich and entirely apt movement that theme and score have inspired in MacMillan.

To the soprano solo *Domine Deus* there is a duet for Penney and Hosking of gentle, trusting affection; the succeeding *Domine Fili unigenite*, musically joyous, is no less so in the writing for Wendy Ellis and her companions. The *miserere nobis* finds Penney, Eagling and Hosking caught in poses of heart-stirring sculptural beauty. Everywhere, MacMillan finds dance imagery that matches both the gravity and the happier aspirations of his score, suggesting that his ghosts survey what was, and what might have been, with some dispassion. If there is the bitterness of regret and accusation, it is most clearly felt in the writing for Eagling, to whom falls the final section of the ballet when his companions have returned to their rest – like troops going over the top into action – and he makes a last tearing circuit of the stage before plummeting backwards out of sight.

Performances are magnificent. Penney, Eagling, Hosking; Wendy Ellis and her companions, all are seen at their best. Musically *Gloria* is no less commendable, with Teresa Cahill and a section of the Opera chorus under Ashley Lawrence.

About this notable acquisition to the repertory, and the

admirably re-dressed and revised – though under-danced – *Four Seasons*, more after a later performance.

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Looking at *Gloria* again on Saturday afternoon, when MacMillan's new ballet had its second performance, I found my initial impressions about its choreographic and emotional power confirmed. The poem from Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, which is given as a programme note, provides a starting point for our understanding, as for MacMillan's creativity, but it is unwise to seek too literal a meaning for the piece. It is a meditation upon death's harvest in the First World War, with the musical – but certainly not the doctrinal – matter of Poulenc's *Gloria* providing the direct impulse for the choreography. There are certain inevitable correspondences to be noted, though not stressed, between words and danced action (as at the *suscipe deprecationem nostram*, where movement has the same piercing appeal as the choral statement of the prayer), but it is the choreographic images through which MacMillan unites his score and his theme that catch and hold the imagination.

Andy Klunder's austere, evocative setting places the ballet at the world's edge, and MacMillan makes tremendous emotional and theatrical capital from the sense that his cast of ghostly soldiers and their womenfolk return for a brief span from nothingness. As they re-live earthly joys and earthly suffering, the men are sometimes placed like troops on guard, gazing out over the unfathomable reaches from which they have come. During the masterly duet for Jennifer Penney and Julian Hosking, five men lie like sleepers, or corpses, as a terrible counterpoint to the lyrical line of the *pas de deux*.

A brief, heart-shattering moment comes when, as the cast finally return to their rest, one soldier (I think it is Anthony Dowson) looks back as if to recall for a last time what the world has meant. And here there seems a clue to *Gloria's* larger implications, not just as portrait of the immediate victims of the war, but as a paradigm of war's emotional resonance for its survivors, and for later generations.

Yet if *Gloria* is an example of dance's power to express, and stimulate, feeling, it is no less an example of a choreographer working at full and superlative stretch as a maker of dance itself. The language owes something to *Requiem*; it also shows MacMillan

moving forward from the elegant innovations of *La Fin du Jour* to find a darker palette of movement, of exceptional richness in metaphor, which can in one brief section encompass the grief of women mourning over a corpse in a *pietà*-like group, and the comradeship of men in battle.

The joyous outbursts of the score are matched in the happy, sportive writing for the exemplary Wendy Ellis and her three partners (Dowson, Ross MacGibbon, Ashley Page); Wayne Eagling makes a brutal entrance rolling down the incline of the set as if blasted by a shell, and the unease, the anger that mark his suffering are implicit in his movement throughout an arduously written and wonderfully danced role that is the embodiment of Housman's 'Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose; but young men think it is, as we were young'.

For Jennifer Penney as the central female figure there cannot be praise enough: I do not think I have seen her dance better. Her beautiful line, her always easy technical command, are here infused with a radiant simplicity and inevitability. In dancing absolutely pure, she conveys exactly the extent of the sorrow at irreparable loss that speaks from Vera Britain's poem.

Gloria is a daring work, in image and execution. A lesser talent might fail to persuade us of the union possible between score and theme, and of the haunting power of the work of art that could result from such a union. MacMillan triumphantly succeeds.

Isadora, 2 May and 5 May 1981

Kenneth MacMillan's *Isadora*, given its world première at Covent Garden on Thursday night, is ballet asserting its place in the theatre. It may not, in fact, be seen as a ballet: its reliance upon speech, its swiftly-changing and cinematic form, are far from the accepted canons of 'ballet' as usually propounded by our national company. Moving far on from *Anastasia* and *Mayerling*, it rejects all the polite and binding shackles of the nineteenth century full-length entertainment to offer a theatrical fantasy about Isadora Duncan which is as unconventional and iconoclastic as its heroine. It involves two performers – the ballerina Merle Park, the actress Mary Miller – to impersonate Duncan. Miss Park is the lissom, dancing 'Isadora' whom Duncan saw herself to be; Miss Miller is the 'Isadora' of the writings, the speeches and harangues so central

to Duncan's art. As she said to Arnold Genthe: 'I may not be a good dancer, but I do know how to speak.'

Duncan-Miller is observer, commentator to Duncan-Park, but the personality does not seem schizoid. Rather do we understand the two figures as inalienably one, just as we can still recognise our essential selves in old photographs, for *Isadora* returns to a theme vital to MacMillan's creative process – his almost Proustian concern with the reconciliations possible between what we were and what we are. Thus, like *Anastasia's* third act, *Isadora* is a series of confrontations with the past in which Duncan-Miller views her present and former self, rejoicing and, mostly, grieving with her. At the end, as the fateful Bugatti screeches to a stop, a wild but potent truth has emerged about Isadora, a figure whom MacMillan presents as sympathetic, authentically tragic.

Isadora is in two acts, each lasting about 75 minutes, in which the chronology of Duncan's life is generally observed. They are too generous in incident, and there are certain side-swipes at the Duncan world which I think might with advantage be pruned. In the first act *Isadora* is the ardent young woman who had the intelligentsia of Europe at her unshod feet. A fine setting by Barry Kay seethes with a flux of scenes and movement wherein Duncan emerges as an artist, and as a woman loving and living not wisely but too well.

Her art is placed in the context of the debased theatre dance of her time – MacMillan caricatures a dreadful French ballet troupe and a group of raucous Spaniards, and is somewhat unjust to Loie Fuller – while Duncan's emotional awakening, sparked off by a lesbian admirer, leads on to the affairs with Beregi and Gordon Craig. The second act charts her fearful decline, from the liaison with Paris Singer, by way of the death of her children to the Russian venture, the disastrous marriage to Essenin, the catastrophic American tour, and the last empty years in Nice.

MacMillan's procedures are, as I have suggested, cinematic. Gillian Freeman's scenario, and her text selected from Duncan's writings and orations, guide the narrative from one cataclysm to the next. Barry Kay's design, a permanent set with a huge curtain on a circular track to aid the swift 'dissolves' of the action, assist this fluidity of presentation. Richard Rodney Bennett's theatrically vivid score encompasses both pastiche piano music for Duncan's solos and clearly personal writing for the main text of her life. And,

to impel the drama forward, MacMillan uses every resource open to him in the theatre, from limp or urgent evocations of Duncan dances to tormented and involuted duets, from big set-pieces – the rain-washed funeral of Duncan’s children is a stunning scene – to actors in the auditorium vilifying Isadora on her last American tour (with Mary Miller transformed, and magnificent, as the heroic Duncan who dances the Marseillaise).

I hope to write more fully about this theatre-piece after its second performance tonight. Meantime, I can but salute MacMillan’s daring, the dramatic playing of the entire cast, and hail in particular the beautiful, potent interpretations of Merle Park and Mary Miller, not two Isadoras but one, and absolutely compelling.

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At the heart of MacMillan’s *Isadora* is the moment when Paris Singer tells Isadora of the death of her children. Merle Park, the dancing Isadora, is seated centre stage; Mary Miller, the speaking Isadora, reclines on a chaise-longue by the proscenium arch. There ensues a duet for Park and Derek Rencher (the sensitive Singer) so intense in grief, so intimate, that it seems intrusive on our part to watch. There is nothing balletically conventional about the choreography; nothing remotely ‘beautiful’ or – in *Dark Elegies* fashion – controlled. It is raw, heart-tearing, ugly as grief itself.

As it ends Merle Park opens her mouth in wordless agony. And, so strong the link that has been established for us between Park and Miller, the gaze travels towards the other Isadora, whose mouth gapes in the same way. Mary Miller cries out the children’s names, falls to the floor in a pose reminiscent of one taken by Park, then drags herself across the stage screaming from the depths of her being, before two attendants carry her away.

There follows the bravura image of the funeral, with the figure of Duncan-Miller, swathed in trailing purple draperies and paralysed with shock, dragging past the long line of mourners in their gleaming black waterproofs. Only after this do we see Duncan dance again, two solos (grandly done by Park, and by the pianist Anthony Twiner) at last showing Isadora transmuting her suffering into the form most naturally expressive for her.

This vivid sequence suggests what MacMillan has striven to achieve throughout his new work. With defiant energy he has put his fist through the looking-glass wall of the ballet studio, which

reflects back to dancers the sweating and obsessive image of their own bodies, in an attempt to let in a view of the outside world of the theatre.

Isadora, with its spoken commentary, its episodic structure, its deliberate exclusion of the conventional is, in its own way, as concerned with radical dance change as its heroine. The constantly dissolving scenes, the switches in mood, MacMillan's determination to go beyond the expected, endow *Isadora* with an energy that owes as much to its rebellious intentions as it does to Duncan's life.

I watched *Isadora* for a second time on Saturday night, and its merits seemed readily apparent. Surrounding the extraordinary passage of the children's death is dancing which finds MacMillan entirely master of his means. Duncan's own solos are strikingly evocative of her art as we understand its impact on her contemporaries (rather than in the reconstructions that occasionally emerge in recitals); the duets which tell of Isadora's liaisons range from the insinuating pas de deux with the lesbian 'Nurse' to an impassioned youthful interlude with Craig (Julian Hosking never better) which gives sexual frankness entire dance validity and makes a terrible contrast with the final view of the hennaed and blowsy Isadora at the mercy of the boorish Essenin.

There is much other dancing; an inflammatory tango with Ashley Page, sinuous and brilliant; a brief view of the Isadorables, those luckless girls who toured with Duncan, limpidly charming and led with lovely grace by Jennifer Jackson. The undulations of the Loie Fuller troupe, now identified as 'in rehearsal' which explains both La Loie's antics (Laura Connor tearingly funny) and the fevered pursuit of Isadora by Nurse (Monica Mason) under the billowing silk, is part of a trio of comic scherzi.

The others are the Petit Ballet de Paris, whose dainty activities are dominated by Rosalyn Whitten's mad vivacity as Cupid, and the Spanish *Wadswa* troupe, whose personnel could with advantage be reduced by half, though without losing Sally Inkin's impetuosity as the Tornado of Old Seville. All this, in the context of MacMillan's imaginative vitality in mixing dance with what may conveniently be called 'production', makes for exciting, brave spectacle.

The flaws in *Isadora* come with MacMillan's concern to show many aspects of Duncan's life and the problem has clearly been

how much could *not* be left out from that torrent of incident. The profusion of scenes – not a comic-strip, but, perhaps, a tragic-strip – tends to weaken the artistic focus of the work. When many sections make their emotional points so well, those that are less dramatically crucial – a second Russian railway scene; a dream sequence in which Isadora, in labour with her third child, has visions of her previous lovers; an interlude with Essenin; the farcical seduction of Caplet – dissipate the momentum of the piece. It is one of the ironic benefits of the spoken text that expository narration, necessary in a conventional ballet, is no longer needed when Mary Miller's blazing incarnation of Isadora guides us across these bridge-passages. Because Duncan's life moved from one cataclysm to another, it must seem that pruning would help to stress Isadora's own headlong descent as her life roared out of control – form and material closely identified.

Because of the work's episodic nature, only Isadora is a developed characterisation. Merle Park and Mary Miller are superb at every moment. Miss Park has never seemed freer in movement, no more expressive – the dance after the death of her children all unshed tears – or light in touch in presenting the girlish Isadora of the first act. Miss Miller (who selected the texts she speaks) declares herself an actress of glorious power, Isadora complete down to the least detail of actual and metaphorical breast-baring; the rapture, the tears and the unquestioned bravery of the woman are marvellously there. The Royal Ballet's artists have risen splendidly to every challenge of this wildly daring work. I would like to think that audiences will do the same.

Orpheus, 15 June 1982

Kenneth MacMillan's *Orpheus* was given its first performance on Friday night as part of a triple bill of Stravinsky ballets marking the centenary of the composer's birth. *Orpheus* is a score of deliberately restrained sonority and form: 'throughout major parts of this ballet Stravinsky thinks of his music in terms of speaking quality and as giving voice to the inflections of the figures and their story', wrote Ingolf Dahl in the invaluable *Stravinsky in the Theatre* symposium which was produced to mark the first performance of the ballet in 1948.

It is such austerity of means which marked Balanchine's original realisation, and it also controls MacMillan's language in this new staging, which alters the Stravinsky/Balanchine narrative only in suppressing the Bacchantes who kill Orpheus (his death comes at the stabbing points of the Furies) and in introducing a Dark Angel, who is also Pluto, to struggle for Orpheus' soul with the Angel of Light.

In retelling the myth MacMillan is affected by one other consideration: the playing of Orpheus by Peter Schaufuss, one of the most astounding virtuoso dancers of our time in sheer prodigality of technical skills, and also an artist of refined expressive gifts. Hence the dancing for Orpheus and Eurydice (Jennifer Penney, so classically clear in style) stresses linear purity that, like the music, seeks control rather than emotional extravagance, albeit Orpheus' initial solo, when he has watched Eurydice sink into Hades, explodes into a whirlwind of steps that marvellously convey his desolation and anguish.

For the two Angels who struggle for Orpheus' soul, in the first scene, MacMillan has made dances of extreme sculptural convolution as they lock in combat, and suddenly – in a stunning theatrical coup – we see Orpheus and the Dark Angel (Wayne Eagling) skied high on a golden ladder which leads, in Nicholas Georgiadis' admirable design, like a shaft down into the underworld. On either side are two further constructions of gold ladders on which the Furies perch, watching the grey mass of the lost souls whose bodies become the waters of the Styx on which the body of Eurydice will float.

The music's restraint is never more potent, and MacMillan's response never more persuasive than in the succeeding solo for Eurydice (it looks on a first viewing gentle, almost happy) and in her duet with the blindfolded Orpheus, its economy of expression quite as subtle as that of the music, with an understated but heart-rending conclusion as Eurydice is borne away, her body twitching convulsively in renewed death throes. Led by the Dark Angel, the Furies (like horrific insects in their glittering red head-dresses) turn on Orpheus, and the final scene becomes an apotheosis marked by another powerful image. Apollo (Derek Deane) enters, gold masked and haloed, not a conventional presentation of a classic deity but a science-fiction being, walking with a robotic glide, totally inhuman. As he raises Orpheus' lyre towards the heavens,

the lovers are seen rising in a gold-mesh 'gloire', their immortality, like Orpheus' song, assured.

Nicholas Georgiadis' designs are entirely in tune with the controlled effects of score and choreography: the vision of golden skeletal forms against black, cut through by the angry red of the Dark Angel and the Furies, is poetic, apt. In the role of Orpheus MacMillan's use of Peter Schaufuss' virtuosity is never gratuitous; the dance feeds from his bravura but also enhances it, and emotion is vivid in the tearing and tormented leaps he performs as in the sustaining dignity of his style.

Jennifer Penney is at her most fluent as Eurydice; Wayne Eagling's aggressive menace as the Dark Angel, the gentler strength of Ashley Page as the Angel of Light and the ferocity of the Furies, are very fine.

Orpheus was framed by two Stravinsky scores in their first choreographic settings. *The Firebird* after 70 years is a period piece which can convince when its interpretations are as well rounded as those of David Wall as Ivan, and Derek Rencher as Kastchey. *Les Noces* was given with an immaculate timing that is tribute to the intelligence and rhythmic precision of the Royal Ballet.

Valley of Shadows, 7 March 1983

Kenneth MacMillan's new *Valley of Shadows*, which I watched for a second time on Friday night, returns to themes which have much concerned the choreographer in recent years: the matter of what a ballet may treat as subject in the closing decades of the twentieth century (and not the nineteenth, whatever a conservative public may believe); the possibilities of narrative; the nature of emotional loss and isolation, which has ever touched MacMillan's rawest creative nerve; historical incident as a fit subject for dance, whether actual, as in *Anastasia*, or social, as in *La Fin du Jour*. Indeed, this latter work now seems more significant than its surface brightness first suggested. When, at its end, Merle Park closes the door at the back of the set to shut out the encroaching night, it is that darkness which is to fall on the concentration camp of *Valley of Shadows*.

Valley of Shadows is the sterner, more literal, side of *La Fin du Jour*, and it has set considerable narrative problems for MacMillan. These, I find, he has largely solved, with the alternating scenes in the doomed garden (Yolanda Sonnabend's poetic setting rich

in symbols – urn, obelisk, statuary – evocative of death) and the concentration camp as shifts both in time and emotional viewpoint. The heroine Micol's tragedy is double, and MacMillan shows us a self-centred girl with her affections torn between her awareness of the young love offered her by Giorgio (Guy Niblett very fine in his innocent passion), and her own physical response to the unambiguously sexual but ambivalent Malnate (Ashley Page, broodingly sensual).

Yet nearest to the centre of Micol's feelings is her love for her brother Alberto, an identification almost incestuous in its response to his *dégagé* charm and his sickness (he is dying of leukemia), presented with great sensitivity by Derek Deane.

The ballet's progress is a study in Micol's increasing isolation, the garden depopulated as family and friends disappear into the death camp, as her brother succumbs to his disease, and as she loses Malnate to military service and Giorgio flees Italy. A crucial moment comes when Giorgio, in their last meeting, flings his Star of David arm-hand at her feet, a doubly symbolic action in which he rejects his fate and reminds her of her identity as a Jew. At last, in the death camp, Micol has to face everything that she has chosen to hide from in the garden, and identify herself with the destiny that has overtaken family and friends.

In exploring this level of his narrative, MacMillan has devised choreography as inventive and lyrically passionate as any he has made in recent years. A ravishing quartet in which Micol soars through the garden on the arms of the three young men in her life has a rushing, impetuous beauty.

The various duets are judged with acute perception of the differing nature of Micol's involvement with Giorgio, Malnate, Alberto, and in them Alessandra Fern shows uncanny sensitivity for so young an artist. Seeming never to give herself fully to Giorgio; entirely aware of what Malnate means in purely physical terms; obsessive with Alberto, Miss Ferri lives her role with astounding communicative power.

It is in the concentration camp scenes that MacMillan courts theatrical disaster. On the ballet's dramatic terms they need to be shown as the truth which Micol (and how many more) sought to ignore, and MacMillan neither capitalises on their bestiality nor sentimentalises them.

MacMillan's imaginative resource here produces dance imagery

that is even harsher and more penetrating than those raw, torn-from-the-psyche agonies that told of Isadora's grief at the death of her children; movement is reduced to its angriest, most anguished outlines, and presented by Sandra Conley, Julie Wood and David Wall with admirable sincerity. The scenes are profoundly disquieting; their triple repetition may diminish any shock value but they are essential to the exploration of Micol's story and to the emotional momentum of the piece.

About the welcome arrival of *Requiem* – whose choreographic serenities and momentary acknowledgments of divine wrath (the men impelled by terror in the *libera me*) are exactly those of Fauré's music – little needs to be said, save to note the cool clarity of the Royal Ballet performance, and to salute Bryony Brind and Wayne Eagling in their debut performances. It is a beautiful ballet, and it eases the mind after *Valley of Shadows*, without diminishing the new work's impact.

Different Drummer, 27 February 1984

In turning to Büchner's *Woyzeck* as subject for his new ballet, Kenneth MacMillan has, like editors of the text and producers of the play before him, organised the disjunct material of the original for his own thematic purposes. For MacMillan, *Woyzeck* is an agonised victim of his world – a character he has studied before – but here entirely powerless. Brutalised by the military machine, by insane medical research, by his pitiable love for Marie, he is a man without hope, without a future. To find an aesthetic setting in which to expose this figure, MacMillan has turned to German expressionism, and we are presented with a production and dance manner which has much in common with the drawings of Georg Grosz: nightmare distortions, juxtapositions as wild yet revelatory as Grosz's *A Winter's Tale* portrait of Germany in 1918, are the fabric of the piece, torn from the psyche of its hallucinating anti-hero.

There results an emotional climate of unrelieved horror, a *totentanz* led by the strutting Captain and the crazed Doctor (superb portraits from David Drew and Jonathan Burrows), with the slutish Marie (Alessandra Ferri) and the sexual opportunist Drum Major (Stephen Jefferies) at the head of a whirling horde of soldiers

and their whores, all racing through Woyzeck's bemused head. If Grosz provides an immediate point of visual reference, much of the motivation of the work seems nearer to that other Expressionist, Max Beckmann, who wrote in 1915: 'This infinite space, whose foreground has always got to be filled with some rubbish or other, so as to disguise its dreadful depth. What would we poor human creatures do if we weren't always ready to summon up an idea – Fatherland, love, art, religion – to cover up just a little bit of the dark, black hole. This sense of being abandoned endlessly in eternity. This loneliness.'

But MacMillan's *Woyzeck* (in an amazing, desperate and wholly compelling reading by Wayne Eagling) has not even the resources of Fatherland, love, religion, art. He is as manipulated as the Bunraku puppets of *Rituals*, and it is to MacMillan's great credit that from the tormenting and tormented images that crowd the stage, he has marshalled a haunting narrative that reverberates in the mind long after curtain-fall.

The setting is the Opera House stage itself, and as a fortuitous result of an original design not proving suitable, the ballet was played at Friday night's première against the flats for *Andrea Chénier*, entirely suitable both as vestigial barracks and the 'nowhere' of Woyzeck's inner world. The fine costuming by Yolanda Sonnabend is in anonymous no-colours, grey and dusty, with the Drum Major's red coat a sole flame of the life force. The score is a partnering of Webern's opus 1 *Passacaglia*, used for a first scene to establish Woyzeck's plight, and Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night*.

The torments inside Woyzeck's mind are shown to us as phantasmagoria. He is the brute soldier used for medical experiment; he is obsessed with decapitated heads; he has visions of the deposed Christ whose feet Marie as the Magdalen wipes with her hair. He watches Marie with his child, and sees her coupling with the Drum Major, and is surrounded by soldiers and their whores. He shaves the Captain (a sequence of extraordinary choreographic ingenuity) and knows some solace in the companionship of Andres (a beautifully played performance from Guy Niblett), kills Marie and then drowns himself. And at the last we see the transfigured night of Woyzeck and Marie as their spirits are reunited, while the Captain and the Doctor wheel their earthly remains across the stage on mortuary trolleys.

More fascinating, though, than MacMillan's use of his dramatic

material is the dance imagery he has devised. He has rarely ventured so daringly before, though I would cite the last act of *Anastasia* as a fore-runner of the ballet's shape, and some of the darkest moments of *Isadora* (the grief duet between Duncan and Paris Singer) and *Valley of Shadows* (the concentration camp scenes) as indications of his ability to find movement that becomes the physical essence of suffering.

The writing for Mr Eagling as Woyzeck pushes to what seem the very limits of dynamic and emotional expression in ataxic, sinuous movement. (Beckman said of Heinrich von Kleist: 'Just think of what he might have been able to achieve if he had been tougher.' Well, MacMillan and Eagling are tougher. And they have achieved). Uncomfortable, haunting, brave, *Different Drummer* needs to be seen, and seen again.

The Prince of the Pagodas, 9 December 1989

The Prince of the Pagodas is, as Donald Mitchell writes in a programme note, Britten's biggest and longest purely orchestral score. It was made for John Cranko's fairy-tale ballet (which combined elements from *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, even *King Lear*) in 1956 and, naturally enough, fixed character and situation with absolute exactness.

Hearing the score again in the theatre on Thursday night, when Sir Kenneth MacMillan's new version of *Pagodas* received its first performance, I was struck, far more than in the Cranko staging of thirty years ago, by the intensity of dramatic flavour, the clarity of portraiture, that Britten provides. In this has lain the inhibiting factor for anyone seeking to bring the music back to the theatre. Cranko's libretto was conceived as a peg on which to hang dances. The weakness of the action denied any real emotional life to his characters, and fine though Cranko's choreography often was, the absence of coherent or gripping dramatic argument was ultimately to cost his ballet its place in the repertory.

The masterly score remained. Could anyone – though Heaven forbid that any one should – re-choreograph *The Sleeping Beauty*? The question is posed since behind Britten's writing there lies the example of Chaikovsky's most perfect masterpiece, which served as a point of reference for composer and choreographer in 1956.

MacMillan, during a decade in which he has periodically contemplated restaging *Pagodas*, has realised that a radically altered narrative for this score is unthinkable. Character, incident, are so explicit that change would deny the music utterly. Hence Colin Thubron, as new librettist, and MacMillan have decided on a strengthened but only slightly adapted scenario, while giving the original story an added seriousness of emotional values.

The action still tells of an old Emperor dividing his realm between his daughters, the Princesses Epine and Rose. How Epine casts an evil spell on the kingdom, seizes power from her father, turns Rose's betrothed prince into a salamander, and how at last Epine is defeated and Rose's compassion wins her the prince and restores her father to happiness is essentially Cranko's tale. Colin Thubron and MacMillan have provided a subtext concerning Rose's journey of self-discovery which allows MacMillan to consider elements that have ever concerned his finest choreography. And, be it immediately noted, the choreographer has responded with some of his most radiantly open and classically brilliant writing.

Sleeping Beauty must inevitably be in our minds when watching this new *Pagodas*. Not because there are elements of pastiche in score or dance, but because Chaikovsky and Petipa have served as example and inspiration. The narrative, the formal structure of the music with its short and marvellously crafted incidents, succinct and sharp in drama, invite and receive choreography of comparable felicity and emotional resonance.

A prologue sets the scene, and the first act shows the kingdom under Epine's curse, a monkey court surrounding a doddering monarch (Anthony Dowell magnificent as a kind of senile baby). Kings from the four corners of the earth come to court Epine (Fiona Chadwick, maliciously dazzling in step), each representing some flawed aspect of manhood. The King of the North (Antony Dowson) is brutish; the King of the East (Bruce Sansom) is narcissitic, in a prodigious variation of slow controlled steps and quick trippings, ever consulting his image in two mirrors; the King of the West (Mark Silver) is a nincompoop; the King of the South (Ashley Page) is of menacing sexuality.

Princess Rose (Darcey Bussell, whose freshness and technical grace give the role exquisite life) also rejects the Kings, and it is the ambiguous figure of the Fool (Tetsuyu Kumakawa, bounding

through the action as if air were his element) who guides Rose into a spiritual journey that takes up the second act. The Fool seems a symbol of the power of innocence, a Zen figure, and leads Rose to self-discovery as she faces the nightmare elements of her world, until she at last finds the Prince (Jonathan Cope: noble, expressive) whom she can see only as a salamander, though when she dances blindfold with him he takes on human form.

In the third act Rose returns to what is now Epine's realm. Her compassion frees the Salamander from enchantment, and he battles with the four Kings, defeating them, so that Epine is vanquished and truth and spiritual health are restored to the Emperor's kingdom.

MacMillan presents this action through a torrent of dancing, classical in manner, ever inventive in revealing character. The choreography is set within the framework of a production that, like Nicholas Georgiadis' grand and stylish design, has the clarity and directness of a child's storybook, but also the psychic reverberations that are the other world of fairy-tales. We are aware of the deeper meanings, but what greets the eye first is a dance spectacle of tireless virtuosity. There will be much more to say after further viewings, and it suffices at the moment to salute the entire Royal Ballet performance, not least the soloists who are so handsomely displayed in the writing for the clouds who feature in Rose's journeyings.

The principal players are magnificent. For Darcey Bussell, so radiant in her gifts, with floating jump and lovely ease when faced with the exciting demands made by MacMillan, every praise. For Jonathan Cope, great admiration for his sensitivity as the salamander and his shining power as the prince. Fiona Chadwick gleams with menace and dances superbly as Epine; Anthony Dowell is both commanding and pathetic in a role which MacMillan has now made crucial to the drama, and the Four Kings, the dazzling Fool of Tetsuyu Kumakawa, Leslie Edwards as a Counsellor, and four grotesque doctors, are all marvellously conceived and interpreted. Ashley Lawrence, happily returned to the Opera House, led a most satisfying account of a score whose riches have been restored to the theatre.

MacMillan shows in *Pagodas* how the language and formulae of the old classic ballet are still true and vital exactly a century after *The Sleeping Beauty* was first performed, not through blind

emulation, but through love and understanding and trust. A grand achievement.

The Judas Tree, 20 March 1992

Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *The Judas Tree* was given its first performance by the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden on Thursday night. On its most immediate level it concerns harsh and all too familiar incidents of urban brutality. Jock McFadyen has made brilliant designs of a building site – ladders, walk-ways, unfinished walls, two derelict motor cars – peopled by a group of workmen under a foreman (Irek Mukhamedov).

A girl, Viviana Durante, is brought in, sexually predatory and flirtatious, who provokes jealousy between the foreman and one of his friends (Michael Nunn). She is eventually subjected to gang-rape by the men, is killed, and the foreman accuses his friend of her death. The friend is murdered. The foreman hangs himself. The girl reappears as a grieving memory and reproach for what has happened. The curtain falls.

Violence is the common-place of life in many cities: last week a report told of appalling gang-rape in the Halles district of Paris. MacMillan's argument – and it is one sustained with extraordinary choreographic imagination – is that beneath the animal crudities of the incident, we may learn about the human condition, and a continuum of human suffering and remorse. This he relates through a series of emotionally resonant images, and through actions mysteriously and subtly revelatory of his larger theme.

Betrayal is explicit in the narrative. In Mukhamedov's staggering performance – the role is black in tone, but shot through with the man's need for love and his mistrust of that love – we know both sympathy and despair (but mainly sympathy) for this combination of brute power and vulnerability. With Durante we see a girl whose sexual bravado and street-smart personality are a mere shell which is shattered by her terrible suffering. In her relationship with every man on stage (she is one woman faced with fourteen men) we must consider both the battle between the sexes and a battle for sexual equality – or supremacy. When she first appears, she is carried in under a white sheet, and at moments throughout the action she dons this as a symbol of her untouched and, I would suggest, inviolable femininity, which must eventually be recognised as that

of a mother. That, at the end of the piece, she acquires yet another identity – the grief-laden figure of the *Stabat mater* – is the haunting last note of the ballet.

For, at the deepest level of MacMillan's creation, lies the historical Judas. The references are fleeting, but clear. After the girl's death – and it has been mysteriously presaged by Mukhamedov's drawing round her recumbent body with chalk, just as police used to outline the body of a corpse – Mukhamedov betrays and accuses Nunn with a kiss. Nunn's body is placed in one of the ruined cars at the back of the stage – a latter-day Christ in his tomb – and Mukhamedov, like Judas, hangs himself. It is then that Durante, draped in the unstained white of the cloth, stands like the Virgin Mother.

These various levels of interpretation would be mere cleverness were they not shown to us in dance of the most searching – and revealing – imagery. Identity, motive, feeling, speak through movement unfailingly expressive. Durante's ambiguous relationship with Mukhamedov and Nunn is made clear to us as Nunn carries her above the recumbent Mukhamedov, her feet treading over the his body. (A woman aggressively 'walking over men' is a recurrent image.) The weak 'friend', so well played by Nunn, is given a questioning, ambiguous solo in which his indecisions are exposed. (He finds refuge with Durante under her white sheet, who thereby becomes a mother-figure.) The group of workmen indulge in games, races, that speak of suppressed sexual energy, undirected physicality, ill-defined but pungent menace. Mukhamedov is by turns dominant – astonishing in physical prowess – and broodingly dangerous as he 'fingers' a character in accusation.

There is much to discover in the dance. With *The Judas Tree* MacMillan has again challenged ballet's perceptions about its own identity: he shows the human condition, in actual and symbolic terms, as the central matter of a dance theatre that he continues to enrich. He has also brought two welcome new talents to the Opera House stage. Jock McFadyen's designs are bold, sure. Brian Elias' score is powerful as drama atmospheric in sonorities, providing an urgent motor force for the action. The Opera House orchestra under Barry Wordsworth were fine advocates for it, in an evening which also brought distinguished accounts of Stravinsky's violin concerto and Bizet's symphony in C. Of these, and their bright danced performances, I shall hope to report after a further viewing

of this triple bill – which I would urge dance-lovers to see. The interpretations given by Durante, Mukhemedov Nunn, and their colleagues in *The Judas Tree* are magnificent.

Interview with Sir Kenneth MacMillan,
20 April 1991

Sir Kenneth MacMillan, principal choreographer of the Royal Ballet, has been controversial ever since he staged his first professional ballet at Sadler's Wells Theatre as a young dancer in 1955. He has since become one of the most important forces in the dance of our time. He represents the second generation of creativity at the Royal Ballet, after the founding figures, Dame Ninette de Valois and Sir Frederick Ashton; like them he was director of the Royal Ballet, from 1970 to 1977.

His beliefs about the potential of dance to explore the human condition, his determination that his work must reflect not the fantasies of nineteenth century swan-upping but the emotional crises known to men and women today, have sometimes made audiences uneasy. Ironically, his full-length ballets *Romeo and Juliet*; *Manon*; *Mayerling*, are among Covent Garden's greatest draws and have achieved the status of repertory classics, while his short works are eagerly acquired by companies worldwide. He remains, as always, a very private man whose chief concern is still with finding new possibilities for movement.

'I never sat down and thought about what ballet should do in the theatre, but early in my career I knew that what I wanted to put on stage had to have more reality than much of what I was seeing in the 1940s and 1950s. That might seem strange when one considers what an artificial medium ballet is, with its women on point and its formal language – the whole aesthetic of ballet is not about reality – but I was at odds with everyone who wanted ballet to continue to be 'traditional'.

'I was influenced by other aspects of the theatre and I recall an article by John Osborne – whom I admired very much – in which he spoke of ballet as being effete. Little of what I was seeing then had any contact with a real world of feeling and human behaviour. Ballet looked like window-dressing. I wanted to make ballets in which an audience would become caught up with the fate of the characters I showed them. The only way to get the sort of

expressivity I aimed for was to know how the characters felt and find a means of showing that.

‘I wanted dance to express something largely outside its experience. I had to find a way to stretch the language – otherwise I should just produce sterile academic dance. Even so, the language had to remain very precise. In some of the work I have done which I like best, the movement came swiftly – in the solo I recently made for Anthony Dowell as the tragic, ineffectual husband in *Winter Dreams*, and in the “grief” duet in *Isadora* when Duncan and Paris Singer hear of the death of Isadora’s children.’

This is one of the rawest and most heart-tearing pieces of choreography that MacMillan has made. In it he pushed dance to serve feelings that only one choreographer – Antony Tudor – had shown before.

‘The big difference between Tudor and me is that he always sought to conceal emotion, while I want to get it all out in movement. Tudor’s heroines agonise desperately inside and try not to reveal their suffering. It is very English – you mustn’t show emotion, and I think my ballets embarrass people because I let emotion out.

‘My childhood was very emotionally upsetting. My emotions were stored away and the idea of releasing them, of finding ways of exploring other people’s emotions, came out in my work. I chose a strange medium in which to reveal feelings. But since I didn’t have a good academic education, I couldn’t become a writer. When I saw *Look Back in Anger*, it was a great eye-opener and an influence, because John Osborne had found a way to express his emotions and his frustrations. This was important to me. Emotion could be released, and though it took a longer time for me to achieve this in dance – the language is more intractable, I suppose – it gave me a vital inspiration.’

Was there implicit in all this a conflict with an establishment?

‘I think my entire career has been a fight against the Establishment and its view of ballet. I feel that I had a lot of trouble with the Opera House establishment because of an almost pre-war view there of what ballet was about.’

A prime example came in 1965 when Covent Garden would not allow MacMillan to stage Mahler’s *Song of the Earth*. It was MacMillan’s friend John Cranko who offered him the chance to mount the ballet in Stuttgart. And when it was recognised as an

important work, the Royal Ballet duly acquired it. MacMillan has not made concessions: audiences have had to accept his view of things.

'But even so, my ballets can still offend the public. *Valley of Shadows*, which showed a concentration camp, did not get many performances. It cut across people's strong received ideas about what dance should do. Audiences are upset, not always by the subject matter, but by the way I treat it.'

And yet they would not be offended if such matters were shown by a modern company?

'It is like trying to preach to people who can only believe in what they *think* ballet should be. Prejudice is hard to break down.'

When MacMillan staged his full-length ballet about Isadora Duncan, Earth-Mother of modern dance, it was as if he had lost patience with an ultra-traditional view of ballet, and had broken the mirrors on the dance studio wall that reflect the dancers' sweating and self-obsessed bodies so as to show the world of theatre outside.

'I don't think that I consciously set out to do that, but when I look back it does seem as if I were impatient with ballet. Perceptions had to be broadened. *Isadora* was a very 'theatrical' piece in that I used things the audience didn't expect: speech; the splitting of the role of Isadora between a dancer and an actress. If you work in the theatre, you have to be a magician, and as well as illuminating your subject, you have to excite and mystify and make the audience wonder.'

Nowadays MacMillan's big-scale ballets are staples of the repertory. Has the fighter against the crusted and the reactionary become a Grand Old Man?

'It's strange, but latterly I have felt that I am more accepted by the public. Of course, there's a danger in the immense popularity of the three-act ballet. Increasingly audiences want to see full-length works, and turn away from triple bills. The curious thing is that only here in Britain and in Russia is there that tradition of extended creativity, of choreographers making evening-long ballet. I'm a product of that system and I love making big works. Since my illness [a heart attack three years ago] I find it difficult to maintain my stamina to create a full-evening ballet, though I still believe in them.'

About ballet-making, he is frank.

'A creative artist is driven by his gifts. Now that I am married and have a grown-up daughter, things are different. But as a young man I never thought of anything except the ballet I was creating or the next ballet I had to do. The tension was horrible, yet I had to get it out of my system each time. Now, working in an Opera House with a large company, I have to produce big works that will keep the company dancing. But there are moments when I feel I need to make a small-scale piece, which is difficult within the context of the Opera House.'

'Although I'd thought about making a ballet from *Three Sisters*, I wasn't aware, when I made the original pas de deux for Darcey Bussell and Irek Mukhamedov, of what I had created. When I saw it, I realised that this was the farewell between Masha and Vershinin from *Three Sisters*, and I had to go on and make *Winter Dreams*.

'The subconscious is strange in my ballet-making: as I watched one section of *Winter Dreams*, I found myself becoming nervous because I did not understand if what I had created was right. I was surprised by what I saw. The subconscious takes over, and it is never really satisfied. It acts as a censor, and I become my own critic about the form of what I am making. It is very mysterious.

'I also realise now that I am no better and no worse than the music I use. This may sound patronising to my composers, but it is true. My regret with my last full-length ballet, *The Prince of the Pagodas*, is that the Britten estate would not sanction any cuts. With sensitive editing – and the trustees ought to realise that I would not desecrate a major score – I could have made a tauter ballet.

'But I have to do what I have to do, and I hope the public will like it. If I ever stopped to consider what people wanted, or what I thought they'd like, I'd never do a thing.'

Obituary: Sir Kenneth MacMillan, October 1992

Sir Kenneth MacMillan, principal choreographer of Royal Ballet, collapsed and died backstage at Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, on Thursday. He was aged 62.

One of the most influential as well as the most challenging of modern choreographers, MacMillan sought throughout his career to extend the boundaries of classical dancing so that it might reflect the psychological climate of his time. He gave ballet, and especially

the repertory of the Royal Ballet, a new seriousness, and an emotional honesty rare in an art which he found to be often no more than 'window-dressing' when he started his career as a young dancer with the Sadler's Wells Ballet.

Kenneth MacMillan was born in Dunfermline on 11 December 1929. His childhood was, as he said, emotionally distressing, and dancing became a means both of expression and of escape. He applied for admission to the Sadler's Wells Ballet School, and his first stage appearance was in the production of *The Sleeping Beauty* with which the Sadler's Wells Ballet reopened the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in 1946.

MacMillan's professional experience came initially as a member of the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet which Ninette de Valois established at this time as a nursery for talent. Here MacMillan was recognised as a gifted classical dancer and a performer of fine romantic presence, and he moved between this 'second' company and the Opera House troupe, memorably seen in Balanchine's *Ballet Imperial* as well as in roles created for him.

But he became increasingly unhappy as a dancer, and in the early 1950s he made his choreographic debuts in workshop performances. These revealed undoubted talent, and it is not without significance that his earliest choreography, *Somnambulism*, dealt with dreams and emotional unease. His first professional work, *Danses Concertantes*, was seen at Sadler's Wells Theatre in 1955. A dazzling display of inventiveness by a young man intoxicated with movement, it told of an outstanding creative gift.

There followed a series of commandingly assured pieces for both halves of what was now the Royal Ballet. Yet even in these early productions MacMillan was seeking a way towards a more expressive movement language, and a style that reflected the psychological awareness of the current cinema and theatre.

The Invitation in 1960, which dealt with adolescent sexuality and marital unhappiness, identified the seriousness with which MacMillan could explore the human condition, and his skill in finding dance imagery to expose feeling. *The Rite of Spring* (1962) showed his ability to handle large forces; and with his celebrated realisation of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1965, MacMillan displayed a mastery of that full-length creativity which was to be recognised as central to the identity of The Royal Ballet.

In the following year MacMillan was invited to become director

of the ballet company at the Deutsche Oper in West Berlin. He was joined there by Lynn Seymour, whose outstanding lyric and dramatic gifts were admirably attuned to MacMillan's ideals. He was to make many roles for her during the two decades of their artistic association, including *Juliet*, and in Berlin she sustained both the classical repertory which he re-staged, and his one-act creation *Anastasia*.

In 1970 MacMillan was invited back to London to assume the directorship of The Royal Ballet. The next seven years were not easy for him. He was both administrative director and chief choreographer, though he invited several other creators to work for the company.

The failure by certain sections of the press to understand the full-length *Anastasia* which he produced in 1971 wounded him, and some of his work at this time was given a mixed reception – even *Manon*, which has won a lasting place in the repertory, was initially misunderstood. Nevertheless, under his guidance, the Royal Ballet was a strong, secure ensemble.

In 1977 MacMillan retired from the directorship in order to concentrate upon creativity, and his staging of *Mayerling* in the next year was proof that, freed from the weight of administration, he was able to produce a new grandly-scaled work of exceptional power.

His shorter ballets throughout this time asserted his continuing concern with shaping a dance language that could touch the most serious concerns of the human spirit. Works as varied as *Requiem*; *Song of the Earth*; *My Brother, My Sisters*, *Valley of Shadows* and *Winter Dreams* told of MacMillan's rare imaginative force in devising movement. With the full-length *Isadora* of 1981 he essayed a bravura portrait of modern dance's Earth Mother in the framework of a daring staging. With *Prince of the Pagodas* (1989) he paid tribute to the ideals of Petipa's classicism which were the bed-rock of his own craft.

In all his work MacMillan was guided by a notable sense of integrity. He would not, could not, compromise either his talent or his beliefs about the nature of ballet and his duties towards the Royal Ballet. He understood choreography in the larger context of the theatre, and wanted ballet to be clearly part of that theatre. His ability to clothe the psychology of his characters in ravishing, or searing, or haunting movement, was always theatrically vivid. His

fascination with movement, and with its expressive potential, was a constant of his creative life. As an analyst he could probe unerringly into a personality; it was our ballet's good fortune that he could show what he discovered in such vital dance terms.

His works were staged and admired around the world – during the 1980s MacMillan was an artistic advisor to American Ballet Theatre – and they remain one of the most potent examples of twentieth-century ballet's expressive ability. His last ballet, *The Judas Tree*, produced for the Royal Ballet in March of this year, characteristically showed how MacMillan could find increasingly powerful means of exploring the psyche through a dance language of exceptional precision and expressive force.

Kenneth MacMillan was married to the Australian painter Deborah Williams, and they had a daughter, Charlotte.

It is assumed that Sir Kenneth's death occurred as a result of a heart attack. He was at the Royal Opera House for the revival of *Mayerling*, which was receiving a magnificent performance from a cast headed by Irek Mukhamedov. As the curtain calls began, Jeremy Isaacs, General Director of the Opera House, came on stage with Anthony Dowell, director of the Royal Ballet, to announce Sir Kenneth's death. The audience stood, heads bowed for a silent tribute, and left without speaking.

I met Kenneth MacMillan at the time of his first professional ballet, *Danses Concertantes*, in 1955, and thereafter our friendship was an abiding joy for me. His creative career was charted with sympathy and admiration in these pages: Andrew Porter offered most perceptive appreciation of his work from the very first, and as his successor in the 1970s I also hoped to convey the significance of the innovations, the intense perceptions, that marked MacMillan's choreography. There was an understanding between us, though, that MacMillan never discussed his work: criticism was unguided by anything save an interest in the way he extended the boundaries of classic dance as an expressive language for the theatre.

As a choreographer he was, in his most searching works, custodian of a gift, his genius, which took possession of him. He made what he made because he had to. Superb theatre-craft was consciously his, and an unfailing ability to shape new and stimulating movement, but the creative drive was deep-seated and mysterious. Talking about *The Judas Tree* after its première, he said

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to me, 'I sometimes don't understand all that I've put into a ballet until I've seen it on stage three or four times.'

Standing in silence in the Opera House on Thursday night, sharing the tangible sense of shock that affected the audience, I remembered so much about MacMillan. His marvellous ability to grasp the new; his iron integrity; his humour, and his delight in the improbable and the ludicrous; his faultless eye for a dancer and his lifelong devotion to the classic dance. And, centrally, his great joy in his family life. His profound and compassionate understanding of the human condition gave his choreography abiding truth. His creations gave a new maturity to ballet in our time. They are a vital part of our national heritage, and of the dance of our century.