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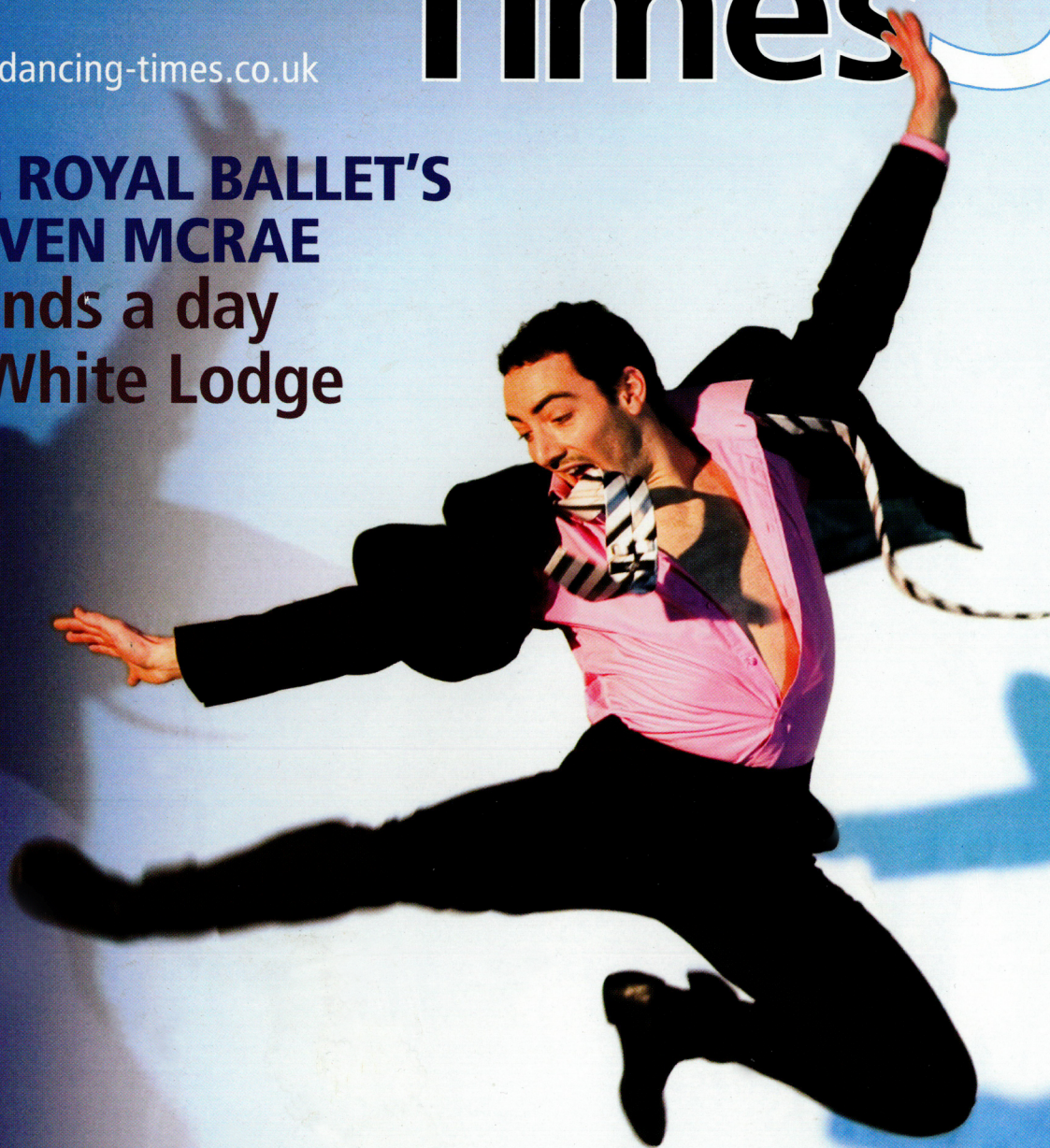
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which reflect the sunny, vivid atmosphere of La Mancha, are a continuous joy to behold. Some characters look as if they have walked straight out of a Velázquez canvas, while the creatures in the Don's dream seem to have been inspired by paintings by Bosch. The dryads' "Vision Scene" was especially memorable for its stylised recreation of arcadian bliss and costumes à l'antique.

A full-length *Don Quixote* had never been staged before in The Netherlands, and this production proves an extremely valuable and challenging acquisition for Dutch National Ballet. It's heartening, moreover, to see that classical ballet gets so much attention and support in Holland. On opening night Anna Tsygankova was a marvellous Kitri, beautiful and fiery, dancing with an irresistible sense of joy and surest technique, and possessing appropriate ballerina grandeur for the "Vision Scene". She was well matched and partnered by Matthew Golding's daring and dashing Basilio.

If not every soloist at the premiere seemed comfortable, I would like to single out Maya Makhateli's lovely mercurial Cupid, as well as the excellent Lorenzo from Altin Kaftira and the funny Gamache from Dario Mealli. The roles of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza have been entrusted to two non-dancing actors, the comedy duo Peter de Jong and Karel de Rooy, who added extra weight to their appearances throughout the story. Ratmansky clearly knows how to inspire the company and the occasional lack of stylistic polish was largely compensated by the dancers' zest. Kevin Rhodes conducted the Holland Symfonia vividly in the carefully restored Ludwig Minkus score, prepared by the Bolshoi Ballet's director, Yuri Burlaka,

Paris Opéra Ballet, Palais Garnier,  
Paris – February 18, 2010

## La Dame aux camélias

Jonathan Gray

Marie Duplessis was only 23 years old when she died in 1847. Moving to Paris to work in a dress shop at the age of 15, her beauty and graceful character quickly propelled her into the world of the *demi-monde*, where she became a notable courtesan. Among her lovers were, reportedly, the composer Franz Liszt, and Alexandre

Dumas  *fils*, who, after her death from tuberculosis, immortalised her as the character Marguerite Gauthier in his novel *La Dame aux camélias*, the virtuous and noble courtesan who sacrifices love, health and happiness for the sake of the respectability of her lover's family.

This romanticised account of Duplessis' life became an instant literary success, which Dumas then turned into a hit stage play that inspired Giuseppe Verdi to compose one of his greatest operas, *La traviata*. Marie Duplessis thus became a historical figure more famous in death than ever she was in

life, and as Virginia Rounding has so acutely observed in her excellent book, *Grandes Horizontales*, the real Marie "slipped into the shadows". The image she has become is almost entirely constructed from the words of others...".

Marguerite Gauthier, unsurprisingly, is a role that has attracted actresses and sopranos as diverse as Sarah Bernhardt, Adelina Patti, Lilian Gish, Greta Garbo and Maria Callas, but it wasn't until the latter part of the 20th century that *La Dame aux camélias* was transformed into a ballet – first in 1963 with Frederick Ashton's *Marguerite and Armand*, for many

Aurélie Dupont as Marguerite and Jiri Bubeníček as Armand in *La Dame aux camélias*. Photograph by Sébastien Mathé.



many years an artful vehicle only for Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, and then in 1978, American-born choreographer John Neumeier created his *La Dame aux camélias*, to music by Frédéric Chopin, for Marcia Haydée and the Stuttgart Ballet.

It is understandable that dancers are attracted to perform roles as romantic as Marguerite and Armand, and in John Neumeier's ballet they get the opportunity, in three acts, to chart the changing emotions and dramatic situations of Dumas' story through dance. Recently, the ballet has become the choreographer's most popular work, being performed not only by the Stuttgart Ballet, but also by companies in Hamburg, Munich, Milan, and later this summer, by American Ballet Theatre in New York.

The Paris Opéra Ballet first performed *La Dame aux camélias* in 2006 and its 2010 revival at the Palais Garnier also marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Chopin. Having never seen anything more than a couple of pas de deux choreographed by Neumeier (his work is rarely seen in the UK), I was keen to see a full-length ballet by the choreographer, and the recent Paris performances afforded me the opportunity to see a work that may well be seen here in the near future.

Unlike Verdi or Ashton, Neumeier draws closely on the Dumas novel. The ballet opens, just as it does in the book, with a voyeuristic public auction of Marguerite's possessions after her death, at which a distraught Armand is present. In his distress, he recollects his affair with the courtesan, starting with their initial meeting at a performance of the ballet *Manon Lescaut* at the Théâtre des Variétés; their first passionate encounter alone; an

idyllic sojourn in the country; the insistence by Armand's father that Marguerite gives him up; Armand's public insult of her at a party; and finally Marguerite's death of consumption alone in her apartment.

The best moments in the ballet are the duets depicting the shifting emotions in Marguerite and Armand's relationship – sexual attraction at first, then a poignant pas de deux in the country revealing the couple's deepening love, and lastly a desperate duet after they have parted that seems dragged out of anger. Neumeier must be credited, therefore, for attempting to depict graphically a love-affair that is true to its source. Sadly, with the exception of the scene between Marguerite and Monsieur Duval, much of the remainder of the ballet seems mere choreographic padding. There is much dancing for the soloists and corps de ballet in ball scenes, party scenes, visits to the theatre, and country picnics, but the choreography seldom adds anything to the overall mood of the work – in fact it seems to detract from it – and it is often hindered by a lack of dramatic structure in the assorted music of Chopin chosen by Neumeier. And there's the rub: Ashton, and above all Verdi, by reducing Dumas to four key dramatic scenes, each made works that were theatrically compelling and honest – a truth that was to be underlined just a few nights later in London during a concert performance of *La traviata* by the Chelsea Opera Group led by the magnetic soprano Nelly Miricioiu.

At the performance on February 18, Aurélie Dupont gave a subtle and varied performance of Marguerite, and danced Neumeier's choreography with the clear-cut beauty of etched glass, but her character had more

in common, perhaps, with that noted courtesan of the Second Empire, Cora Pearl – possibly because Neumeier makes few suggestions in his choreography that Marguerite is a consumptive until the last act. Dupont was at her most affecting in the scene where she is publicly insulted by Armand, and her appearance towards the end of the ballet was stark and tragic.

As Armand, guest artist Jirí Bubeníček interpreted wonderfully a man of patrician dignity broken down by desire and anger. Swift to rise to jealousy, Bubeníček's masculine dancing and forceful jumps were allied to his intense acting, giving an impression of a man tormented by guilt and "romantic agony". Bubeníček is also a strong and resourceful partner – in some of the pas de deux, Dupont's feet barely touched the ground. He must be a dream collaborator for any ballerina, and would surely make a marvellous Crown Prince Rudolf in Kenneth MacMillan's *Mayerling*.

Amongst the numerous other named characters, I was impressed by the sympathetic characterisation and sparkling dancing of Simon Valastro as Le Comte de N, the virtuosity of Vincent Chaillet as Gaston Rieux, and the simplicity of gesture given by former étoile Michaël Denard as Monsieur Duval.

As a post-script to this review, readers may be interested to know that the Palais Garnier is currently displaying, until May 23, a small but fascinating exhibition devoted to Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Included are original designs, paintings, costumes, musical scores, posters and photographs, and the exhibition is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue.

Staatsballett Berlin,  
Staatsoper Unter  
den Linden, Berlin –  
February 27, 2010

## La Péri

Gerald Dowler

Director Vladimir Malakhov has a copper-bottomed hit on his hands with his new *La Péri* for the Staatsballett Berlin. Malakhov, whose artistic policy for his company I have praised in the past, is unafraid to schedule pure entertainment in addition to the "challenging" new works so beloved of his fellow company directors. For his latest addition to the Staatsballett's already impressive repertoire he has turned to a long-lost work by Jean Coralli created in 1843 for the legendary ballerina Carlotta Grisi, using Friedrich Bürgmüller's somewhat rum-ti-tum score, Théophile Gautier's orientalist scenario, and choreographing for himself the action.

There is no hidden meaning to *La Péri*, nor will it move you to tears, but it delights and ravishes both with its outpouring of beautiful dancing and in the most captivating of stage pictures – it simply provides two hours of unalloyed pleasure.

Wisely, Malakhov has steered well clear of a dry, academic re-creation of the Romantic style of the original, and rather has chosen to temper his company's modern ballet technique and thereby to evoke it: legs are kept low in arabesque, jumps tend to be small and there is a concentration on neat footwork and an expansive upper body, held forward as