

Estonian National Ballet: The Goblin

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The Goblin (Kratt) has a special place in Estonian dance as the first ballet with a score by a home composer, Edward Tubin. Premiered in 1943, it still strikes several resonances for the country: it is based on an Estonian folk myth, rather than an imported story; during a performance in 1944, the Opera House was bombed by the advancing Soviets and dancers were seen running in the nearby streets in stage costume; and Tubin, who fled the Soviet occupation to Sweden, where he spent the rest of his life, is revered in his homeland and internationally recognised. The cultural significance of Marina Kesler's new version of the ballet resulted in a sell-out season.

Kesler incorporates ballet, contemporary and folk dance to tell the story of The Master, a factory owner who sells his soul to The Devil and pays the price sooner than expected when he upsets the Goblin created to provide him with money. The ballet opens dramatically with Denis Klimuk as The Master marshalling his workers in a repetitive series of tasks with Tubin's music driving the unison steps. Klimuk dominates the stage as well as his workers with his powerful movement. Before long The Devil appears with apparent answers to his financial problems – seductive in his approach rather than overtly diabolic. Eventually after ensemble dances for devilettes, we see the creation of the Goblin against a visually exciting mix of back projection and projection onto a stage construction of cuboid components. The Goblin is at first tentative and awkward but soon gathers confidence and Jonathan Hanks attacks the role with legs wide apart and feet shaking in his jumps and crouching with his head held high, establishing an other worldly presence.

Kesler has expanded the scenes relating to the romance of the Master's daughter and a farmworker to bring more positive messages alongside the dark satanic goings on. This provides a base for more lyrical movement as the two lovers, Marika Muiste and Jevgeni Grib, express their affection convincingly, first in a duet and then a sextet with four friends, until they are discovered by the Master. After a scene of conflict with Klimuk, Grib dances a fine solo of anguish, his body swaying with the heartache of his situation. But he also sees The Goblin paying the Master and his suspicions are formed.

The opening of Act II is my favourite part of the ballet with the local young people dancing to a series of Tubin's variations on an Estonian folk song with a touching duet for Muiste and Grib. The music is divine and Kesler captures its soul using folk motifs and patterns as varied as those in the villagers' costumes – every village in Estonia having its own design. The Goblin appears and to his surprise and dismay is harassed by the villagers for his thievery. He attempts to bring The Master to his aid, but the latter rejects him. For revenge The Goblin burns down the factory, perhaps evoking in the audience the Soviet bombing of 1943. The Master enters a casino where The Devil takes his money and casts him into the pit. Finally we return to the young people led by the couple enjoying their freedom and closing with the ensemble in silhouette.

With strong designs, a fast moving plot and varied dance styles, *The Goblin* holds the attention. In all the solos, duets and ensemble dancing, the company was on fine form. As an example of ballet theatre there are some shortcomings however. The Master is bad to his workers, bad to his daughter, only interested in money, and remains one dimensional, never gaining the least sympathy. The role of The Devil is under-developed, perhaps needing more overt wickedness. It is left to The Goblin to display character development, as he shifts from servant to aggrieved nemesis. Nevertheless, with its strengths and its differentiation from the company's classical and neoclassical ballets, *The Goblin* provides variety for both audiences and dancers and is a welcome addition to Estonian National Ballet's repertory.