



Coppélia

at a rollicking pace

MIKE DIXON enjoys
Ronald Hynd's slick
production by Thomas
Edur's Estonian National
Ballet in Tallinn

Since becoming director last summer, Thomas Edur has worked successfully to establish a separate identity for his ballet company, with the consequence that the premiere of *Coppélia* on 4 March marked the first official performance of the Estonian National Ballet. The company now has more autonomy, separate funding and a new logo. This has come about due to the mutual trust between Edur and Aivar Mäe, the enlightened new general manager of the Estonian National Opera, and it augurs well for the status of ballet in this important Baltic state. The premiere was attended by the President of Estonia, and a sense of history pervaded the proceedings, since *Coppélia* was the very first full-length ballet to be performed in Tallinn's opera house, in 1922. So the birth of the independent Estonian National Ballet called for an outstanding performance and that is precisely what this exciting company delivered on this auspicious evening.

When the curtain rises on Ronald Hynd's production of *Coppélia* the audience is confronted with a Galician town square, an onion-domed church in the middle distance and a roofscape of bell gables displaying a distinctly



Estonian National Ballet in *Coppélia*. Photo: Harri Rospu

eastern European provenance. In fact, we could be in a corner of Tallinn, so similar is the architecture in the old walled city outside the theatre. The charming set and costume designs of Bruna Guidi de Bagno were not made specifically for Tallinn but they certainly look at home here. Hynd's delightful version of this ballet for English National Ballet is the one against which all others must be measured, since it is simply the best one around, which explains its healthy survival as a staple of the repertoire for 25 years.

The Estonian version is its choreographic twin and displays the same qualities of memorable

classical steps and theatrical clarity. It is, of course, the version in which Edur and Agnes Oaks danced many times and their familiarity with this joyful ballet impelled Edur to choose it as his first offering to the public.

The ballet is conducted at a rollicking pace by the young music director, Mihhail Gerts, who extracts pin-sharp tone and accurate playing from his orchestra. This has to be the fastest *Coppélia* I have ever heard. Delibes' catchy dance rhythms are given a luscious spin in general and the Czardas in particular has an impulsive quality that lends both urgency and excitement to the music. The friska is taken at a hell of a lick and proves exhilarating for both dancers and public. The corps de ballet are absolutely 'eyeballs-out' during this sequence and are gasping for breath during the applause, but they all have a triumphant look in their eyes.

Eve Andre was born to play Swanilda: a petite, dark haired soubrette, she polishes the comedy to a brilliant shine, particularly in the second act, where she brings a minxish edge to her taunting of Coppélius. The technical demands hold no fears for her and she delivers a stylish, commanding

performance. Her Franz, Sergei Upkin, radiates joyful energy and he rattles off double tours and multiple pirouettes with joyful insouciance. He is a considerate partner, with good physical proportions and an open, expressive face. Vitali Nokolajev as Coppélius is a strong mime and although still too young to look entirely convincing as the doddering toymaker, he never overplays any scene and has good stage discipline. He is already able to create his own telling details and it will be interesting to see what aspects of this role he develops in the future.

The company works well as an ensemble, indeed a company spirit infuses the entire evening, but in the last act the four fiancées and their beaux were notable: Svetlana Danilova, Heidi Kopti, Seili Loorits-Kämbre and Tiina Ojanen were ably partnered by Egor Zdor, Aleksandr Kanapjov, Daniel Kirspuu and Jonathan Hanks (an Englishman who has to get some sort of award for enthusiasm on stage as well as shaping every step with proper respect for the choreography). Marika Muiste as Dawn and Nanae Maruyama as Prayer are exquisite and play to each other generously. Sergei Fedossejev as the Burgomaster is a commanding figure, tall and dignified, who seems to embody all that is best in his little community. The ballabile at the conclusion of the ballet was a joyous moment, which proved infectious. At previous performances in Tallinn I noted that Estonians have a propensity to sit on their hands where

applause is concerned, failing to respond appropriately to good performances, but Hynd's *Coppélia* seemed to demolish the natural reserve of the good people of Tallinn, and not only was there much applause, milked delightfully at the final curtain by Upkin (quite rightly), who led his partner in front of the curtain to many cheers and the audience's sustained rhythmic clapping *à la Russe*, but a new sense of optimism seemed to pervade the house. It was an honour to be present at such an historic occasion, and the generous reception given to Ronald Hynd by the Estonian public was greatly deserved.

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Sergei Upkin in *Coppélia*. Photo: Harri Rospu