

ESTONIAN NATIONAL BALLET

Hamlet/Werewolf

Opera House, Tallinn

Tiit Härm, director of the Estonian National Ballet, took a risk when he commissioned a double bill from two home grown choreographers, both working on a large stage for the first time. But risk taking deserves success and this programme, premiered earlier this year, has already secured a place in the repertoire.

In her earlier, contemporary dance work, Oksana Titova has established herself as a successful collaborator, involving gifted artists to create startling visions. *Hamlet* is no exception - a visual feast, with Elo Soode designing striking bell-shaped, unisex dresses, sometimes like over-ripe fruit, and a set consisting of glass cages on runners that the dancers shift around themselves. Video-art by Andres Tenusaar bringing us hatching larvae, an array of doors opening and closing and other images with Taavi Kerikmäe's electronic score, including found noises, ominous bells and computer generated readings from the play, both add to the atmosphere of foreboding. Above all, Titova's choreography completes a strong, contemporary aesthetic, with tortured stretches for Marika Muiste's lost Ophelia and elements of street dance for Daniel Kirspuu's Polonius, standing out from the innovative movement.

Titova takes an intellectual and ambiguous

approach and I suspect many in the audience were puzzled by the dramaturgy, which retains only a few elements of the familiar tragedy. In addition, identifying the principal characters is not always easy. Overall though, an ambitious project, which succeeds in many respects.

Marina Kesler's *Werewolf*, based on Estonian author August Kitzberg's play, opens with great clarity the story of a girl, orphaned when her Mother is accused as a werewolf, but taken in by a concerned family. However, later, romantic tensions with her siblings result in a betrayal and she joins a group of wolves in the forest, before returning to haunt her relatives. Kesler has coaxed excellent performances from the cast, including Eve Andre as the sensitive girl/wolf, Heidi Kopti as her jealous stepsister and Vitali Nikolajev as the loving stepfather.

Using a mix of ballet, contemporary and folk dance steps, *Werewolf* works best in the emotionally charged scenes at the start and end, especially when Arvo Pärt's haunting *Fratres* underpins the final deaths. However, in some of the central scenes there is insufficient choreographic interest and repeated use of waving legs as a symbol of happiness becomes an irritation. Nevertheless, *Werewolf* involves audiences with its themes of love and the need for tolerance, and is already a popular favourite.

The success of these ballets, albeit with caveats, makes me keen to follow the development of the two young choreographers. But between the puzzles of *Hamlet* and the transparency of *Werewolf*, there exists an area of work which stretches audiences without alienating them, and I hope both Titova and Kesler try to explore this territory in the future.

Stuart Sweeney



Estonian National Ballet in *Hamlet*. Photo: Harry Rospuu