

Estonian National Ballet: The Sleeping Beauty

Estonian Opera House, Tallinn, Estonia; November 16, 2014

Stuart Sweeney

As a professional ballet friend of mine told me, "Having "Sleeping Beauty" in the rep is good for a company – it keeps them up to the mark." This beautiful ballet with so many demanding roles has not been in the Estonian rep for the past decade, so it was understandable that Artistic Director, Thomas Edur, should want to set a new production. However, as for all the classics, the Estonian Opera House stage does not help matters. I love this theatre. With some 900 seats it is one of the smallest in Europe and as a result you are never far from the dancers and always feel in contact with them plus the sight-lines are excellent. Nevertheless the stage of around 10m width means that most existing productions simply won't fit. Peter Docherty, the designer, tackled this challenge in close co-operation with Edur. Docherty's sets are both beautiful and practical. The court scenes consist of a few asymmetric pillars at the back of the stage with little clutter, leaving plenty of space for dance. The same open area applies for the vision scene against a forest backcloth

And it's just as well that Docherty has created much space, as Edur's production puts great emphasis on dance with mime cut to a minimum. Some roles are only lightly sketched: The King and Queen look regal but come to the fore less than usual; Catalabutte, Master of Ceremonies, appears in the prologue but once his hair has been dishevelled and pulled out, disappears forever. Edur's revisions have their greatest success in Act 2 where the hunting party is cut to four couples and a few servants. Blissfully, the traditional and tiresome game of blind man's buff is discarded and the four couples appear in Act II as guests of the Prince, performing the divertissements at the final ball and providing a tighter focus than usual.

When the Prologue opens we see courtiers in simple but elegant silver costumes with no brocade and after an initial court ensemble dance we are quickly on to the fairy variations. With the silver courtiers back against the walls they blend into the scenery, leaving the variations as the sole focus. I particularly enjoyed Eve Andre's Fairy of Generosity as with a gentle lyricism she scattered her breadcrumbs. And so to the entrance of Carabosse with Trinu Leppik-Upkin making the most of her wicked vengeance for Catalabutte's oversight: bad girls usually get the best scenes. Nadežda Antipenko as the Lilac Fairy brought sweetness and light to counter Carabosse's evil plans and throughout the evening she maintained fine technical control on her beautiful long legs. However, stylistically, I found her arms often too straight and out of character with the warm nature of the role.

Luana Georg as Aurora seizes the stage on her entry for Act I and with vitality and a mischievous quality establishes a convincing portrait of this young woman on top of the world. Her princes illustrate an acceptance of multiculturalism, with China and India surprisingly represented. Perhaps a veiled political point, as Estonia has powerful ethnic tensions between the Estonian and Russian communities? Georg conveys the excitement of the occasion and accomplishes the demanding rose adagio with aplomb and exquisite attitudes. With the pin prick followed by the collapse of Aurora and the Lilac Fairy's intervention, Docherty drapes the stage with attractive branches and the Princess is suspended on a bed a few feet from the ground.

After the single interval, we meet Prince Désiré; and Andrei Upkin portrays a noble soul yearning for love. I enjoyed Edur's new choreography for the Prince's guests including a dance for the five men with the four hunters that brims with enthusiasm for the chase and contrasts with Désiré's reluctance. Edur has revised the vision scene including, as he explains in the programme, some music not included in previous Estonian Ballet production, including "an incredibly beautiful violin solo to accompany the romantic duet of Aurora and Désiré." He also pays tribute to Conductor Vello Pähn who worked closely with him on the selection of the music. Georg and Upkin create a convincing,

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After skirmishing with Carabosse and the transforming kiss, we move on to a masqued ball with the courtiers in ravishing gold and red costumes in a celebratory court dance. Throughout the ballet, in the ensemble sections both the men and women perform to a high standard. Watching a class taken by Age Oks (Agnes Oakes in her ENB and BRB days) it was a delight to watch her move as elegantly and precisely as ever, setting a fine example for the company.

In the masqued dances, the masks are put aside at the start of each sequence and I appreciated seeing the artist's faces. All this choreography is new and I enjoyed the lascivious tussling of Heide Kopti and Eneko Amorós as the cats, and a suitably wolfish Alexander Prigorovski. Jonatan Davidsson as the Bluebird tackled the demanding choreography with high jumps and crisp execution. Nanae Muruyama's performance as Princess Florina made me wish I could see her Aurora debut later in the season. Edur has also created a duet for Cinderella and her Prince, ably performed by Abigail Sheppard and Jonathan Hanks. While charming it was overshadowed by the animal crackers beforehand and the finale for Aurora and Désiré. The grand pas de deux made for a suitable climax with both Georg and Upkin excelling technically and with great musicality as well as generating the chemistry of a grand romance.

All told, I enjoyed the new production and this beautiful setting of many people's favourite ballet deserves to remain in the Estonian Ballet rep for many years.