Reviews: ENO's Luisa Miller/ Pure Dance, Natalia Osipova

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Luisa Miller, English National Opera, London Coliseum, 21/02/2020

It was Yves Klein who enshrined the notion of the White Cube as an artistic space. His original 1958 work, presented in the Gallerie Iris Clert, painted out the whole space in white emulsion. This radical departure from the more traditional presentation of paintings brought to the viewer's attention the potential of space. What might be daubed on its walls or smeared on its floor? Klein's answer was to come: the painting of space using 'human brushes', women covered in paint and pressed to the surface. It was bold and radical in its day, and created new standards in both gallery presentation and live performance.

Klein's notion of the Void as a space of pure experience, where we are confronted with an emptiness to fill, has become a cliché amongst set designers, especially of opera. I've lost count of the number of productions I have seen that present the void as a starting place and that challenges directors to fill it with their production. It is not unknown in drama circles either, with perhaps the best-known example the classic Peter Brook production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The difficulty is rising to the task, given the extent to which the performers and the material are made vulnerable without some sort of dramaturgic support offered by the set.

Thus it is with the ENO's recent production of *Luisa Miller*. The choice of an all-white void set seems at odds with the quasi-realism of verismo opera, and (confusingly) is only partially followed through by the costumes. Andrew Leiberman, as set designer, doesn't appear to have discussed the aesthetics with costume designer Eva-Maria Van Acker, given the strange sensation of veering from naturalism to design concept without enhancing the performance. Most of the major characters find themselves in modern dress of one sort or another, including arbitrary colour choices that are difficult to fathom. Leiberman's set works better with the chorus, who are clothed in distorted black and white make-up and fetish wear to match.

It certainly seems like there is an attempt at complex casting designed to be both colour-blind and not, aimed squarely at the issues for the characters in trying to fulfil their various destinies. The huge voice of Elizabeth Llewellyn as the eponymous heroine is perfect for this early Verdi work, and she undoubtedly shines despite an unflattering costume. The green print wrap dress doesn't seem coherent with the designs or the character. She is paired with the Korean tenor, David Junghoo Kim in a mixed race casting that plays on the disparity of the social standing they are unable to reconcile. The voice textures are different as well, often jarringly so, given the sheer power demanded from the score and the often-heavy instrumentation of the most dramatic moments. In crucial scenes, Junghoo Kim just doesn't seem to match up, though Solomon Howard's Wurm has a threatening vocal menace to match his physical presence.

It all leads to a general feeling that this is a difficult opera to stage. It is a relatively early Verdi, and there is still a touch of Donizetti or Bellini about the arias that would wane as his career progressed. The story is well told through the music, a sprightly pair of young lovers (though one has a secret), a doting father who won't force his daughter to marry the sinister steward, Wurm, if she doesn't actually love him. Luisa, whose dalliance with the charming Carlos is becoming a scandal, discovers that Carlos is not who she thinks he is, but in fact Rodolfo, the son of the Count. For his part, the Count wants a better match for his son than a local girl, namely his well-born niece. There are revelations, ambitions, arrests, confessions and mistruths, the stuff of opera to be sure, and not short of muddles about who wants what from whom.

All this is made extremely difficult to watch by Barbora Horokava's production. The white void of a set is augmented by some daubing children from time to time, and a central cube construction that turns into Luisa's cell, but the effect of the action is something of a confused mess. Whilst not a great Verdi, the lack of faith in the score to tell the story, and the unfounded sense there is a need to disguise its shortcomings, produces the opposite effect. The direction becomes distracting, when the voices are there telling us it is worth concentrating on something else. The production simply never coalesces around an idea that would allow the value of the music to be felt.

As indicated above, this is in the context of some daring casting that nearly comes off. Certainly the father/daughter relationship works both musically and dramatically, and Wurm's evil bass carries with it significant threat. These feel fully conscious of the decisions to align these forces. But the central love story seems unaware of itself and the point being made; that love makes unlikely partners and we should show tolerance and forgiveness; is lost in the confusions of the final act, where poison finishes what Wurm and the Count's machinations and confusions had begun earlier. It is a brave failure, but it remains just that: over produced verismo that has no place in a white cube set. The ill-fated couple writhe around on a white floor in a stylised church that complements nothing of the action taking place, and the lack of restraint is at sharp odds with what the design wants to tell us about this opera.

Pure Dance, Natalia Osipova, Sadlers Wells Theatre, 25th October, 2019

One of the outcomes of the diaspora of Russian and Eastern European trained dancers has been to challenge some ossified national ballet traditions. For the Royal Ballet, this has meant its global reach and deep pockets have attracted dancers significantly better than its own school could produce. This isn't simply a UK thing, noting that even very hardline, traditional companies have taken to scanning the marketplace for talent. The Staats Ballett Berlin or the Dutch National Ballet also have a collection of dancers from the East, adapting and changing what were national traditions into an internationalised art form.

For the Royal Ballet, there has been no more important import that Natalia Osipova. Now 34, her tremendous presence and power, matched with a muscularity previously eschewed by the ROH when it came to women, has been a significant contribution to the profile of the company. Her travails at the Bolshoi are well known, rising swiftly through the ranks in one of the most turbulent times in the Bolshoi's history, and her difficult relationship with the mercurial Sergei Polounin might have proven more important than anything she could achieve artistically.

Natalia Osipova is made of sterner stuff. A close observer of her dancing can see that. After leaving the Bolshoi behind, she eventually settled in London with the Royal, magically enhancing their performances and demonstrating a willingness to extend her range beyond what most prima ballerinas might deign to engage with. In this she is similar to an earlier import at Covent Garden, the French dancer Sylvie Guillem, who was equally adamant about exploring the possibilities of her potential beyond three act classics.

Much of this desire is captured well in the recent film *Natalia Osipova: Force of Nature*, (Fox, 2019) an otherwise restricted guide to how Osipova sees herself and the opportunities presented to her. It gives limited time to her work in more traditional ballet, and plenty to her collaborations with contemporary choreographers like Arthur Pita and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Both of these are seeking other qualities from Osipova, and give free reign to her power and strength. What is important about Osipova is the shift she represents from a graceful

prettiness to a different kind of dancing woman. This one is in control and possesses a sense of their own destiny, not content to simply continue along conventional paths.

The Sky Arts documentary was geared towards her curation of her own programme at Sadlers Wells in October of 2019. The challenge of this, effectively one dancer sustaining a full evening's work, was surely daunting, and the repertoire presented sensibly varied, which could only make it harder for the dancer herself. The strongest impression made by the whole collection of six (Osipova dances in five of them) is that this is about trust, and expressing that in both the work and her collaborators. One of them, dancer and choreography Jason Kittleberger, is her partner, another a long time collaborator in the American dancer David Hallberg. Her long-standing mentor at the Bolshio, the former director Alexei Ratmansky, also offers up a duet for her and Hallberg, demonstrating an intimate knowledge of her technique and the proportions of the dancers.

If there are issues with such an approach, it maybe that in a programme like this the grand star that she tends to look rather lonely. Given the relentless spotlight on her in these arrangements, the emoting tends to gurning and the physicality of her approach looks sublimated to a concern that she has to be sufficiently interesting. It is a difficult balance. What is certainly true is that her example has inspired a few others: similar programmes highlighting the virtues of a single dancer dropped out of fashion at a certain point, but following Osipova other female ballet stars have taken the plunge (Viviana Durante at the Barbican in February 2020, for instance, or ENB's Alina Cojocaru at the same time). Whatever her durability turns out to be, and for dancers this is always a pressing question, after six years in the UK she has changed the notion of what a prima ballerina might be. That this is in tune with the times makes her something very special, and any performance with her name on it is worthy of notice.