

Double Bill

La Boutique fantasque,
Petrushka
Ballett Magdeburg,
Opera House, Magdeburg
– February 15, 2020

I WAS ASKED RECENTLY if anyone still performs *Petrushka*. The ballet may seem old-fashioned, and the issue of the black-face Moor is challenging, but Ballett Magdeburg, based in the capital of Saxon-Anhalt, brought the work back from the past, dusted it down, and gave it new life and a sophisticated look on a programme, paired with *La Boutique fantasque*, all about dancing dolls and their secret lives. It was a risky move by Gonzalo Galguera, artistic director and choreographer of the young ensemble, but one that paid handsomely.

La Boutique fantasque tells of two dolls about to be separated after being sold to different customers, but it has a happy ending because they manage to stay together with the other dolls in the shop. Galguera's new version gives it a darker twist by inviting us to reflect on our own consumerist behaviour.

The curtain opens to reveal a shop window that divides the stage. Shoppers press their noses against it, all waiting for the chance to buy two new technologically perfect dolls, the finest creations by the Store Owner (Mihael Belilov).

His gravitas provides the hinge that allows the story to shift from what happens inside the shop to the pack-like behaviour of the customers outside in pursuit of the latest "must-have" gadget. The Store Owner climbs over the crowd, but then gets swallowed up, only to reappear and restore order. Galguera is particularly good here at creating flowing

duets and trios, extracting the best from his dancers.

The central couple are two glittery dolls dressed head to toe in sparkling bronze leotards, costumes that emphasise the elegant automaton-like movements of Cuban guest dancer Lissi Baez and her partner, Mexican Rodrigo Aryam. They dance a sensational, hypnotic pas de deux, with unusual mid-height lifts, off-balance promenades and robotic, dangling movements. Their acting and expression make believable the dolls' desire to become human.

The heart of the drama comes when the pair discover they will be disposed of after their novelty has worn off. Behind the toyshop they find a pile of doll parts from which two pairs of undressed dolls (in similar but opaque leotards) shock them with a sad number, beautifully danced by Tatiana Martinez, Cristina Salamon Lama, Emanuele Caporale and Admir Kolbuçaj. Human feelings become evident in the dolls, who decide to escape their fate by leaving.

Christiane Hercher's modern, functional set cleverly allows the audience to view the shop from several positions, thereby encouraging a more immersive experience. When required, the shop window disappears to be replaced by floating panels with subtle video projections that help soften the scene.

From Léonide Massine's original ballet, the Cossacks and the Can-Can dancers remain, their divertissements restoring a playful tone to the ballet. The crowd's precise arm movements in the tarantella recall mass uniformity, as do their androgynous / android-like grey and black costumes (by Stephan Stanisic). This contrasted sharply

with the cheerful score Ottorino Respighi arranged from music by Rossini.

Both ballets are designed in a functional, modern style by Hercher. For *Petrushka*, she utilises geometric lines infused in strong Rayonist blues and reds to recreate a St Petersburg carnival where revellers expect to be entertained. A more magical setting of stars on a blue background accompanies *Petrushka* in his room.

A huge, triangular booth "gives birth" to the tragic *Petrushka*, the pretty Ballerina and the frightening Moor, which the Magician (a manipulative Jonathan Milton) uses in a puppet show of love, rejection and humiliation for the reveller's amusement. *Petrushka* loves the Ballerina who falls for the Moor, who then kills the clown after a chase, making the crowd angry at the Magician.

The four characters wear gloves with their exotic costumes, their faces covered in white foundation over which characteristic make-up is applied. The three puppets, dressed in beautiful black and white outfits, stand out from their surroundings.

Galguera's new version of the ballet shows how cruel humans can be, and turns *Petrushka* into a sad, moving character, performed expressively by guest artist Nikolay Koripaev, a soloist

with Staatsballett Berlin. Together with Anastasia Gravilenkova's Ballerina and Rodrigo Aryam's Moor, he kept the plot moving frantically forward. Mechanical movements abound, but space is left for sustained balances and speedy footwork for the Ballerina, scary jumps and fierceless tours-en-l'air for the impulsive Moor, and circus-like contortions for the disenchanted and humiliated *Petrushka*. Although he dies, the puppet's ghost appears at the end above the carnival.

The choreographer has visualised beautiful folk-like movements for the carnival revellers filled with undulating waves, chains with changing links, and striking poses in which the dancers move their lips repeatedly. They are enhanced by Stanisic's interpretation of Russian folk costumes.

The Magdeburg Philharmonic provided all the right musical nuances under the baton of music director Anna Skryleva, who, with Galguera, fulfilled a dream in bringing Igor Stravinsky's musical masterpiece to the stage. With Ballett Magdeburg, these vintage works became relevant again.

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Below: Dancers of Ballett Magdeburg in Gonzalo Galguera's new version of *Petrushka*.

