

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Manon

Choreographed by Kenneth MacMillan
English National Ballet
Palace Theatre, Manchester, and touring
(2007)

Manon, described by English National Ballet as offering decadence and passion, is rarely seen outside London. Composed by Sir Kenneth Macmillan in 1974, it is based on a novel by the 18th Century French writer Abbe Prevost. It tells the tale of Manon who has to choose between her pure lover, the student Des Grieux, and the life of a courtesan and attachment to the corrupt Monsieur GM. This is the first time the English National Ballet has mounted the piece and Artistic Director Wayne Eagling was a memorable Des Grieux earlier in his career.

In choosing to revive the work with the blessing of Deborah, Lady Macmillan, the company has opted for the costumes and design of the Royal Danish Ballet production. The sombre hues of the first act give way to a dazzling burst of colour in the dresses of the assorted harlots and courtesans as they dance under the tutelage of their Madam. The coat which Monsieur GM uses to ensnare Manon is silver, edged with fur. In Act three, when Manon and Des Grieux arrive at the penal colony in New Orleans, the waiting militia wear blue naval style jackets and hats.

The staging is simple but effective. In Act One the outside of the Inn is suggested by a backcloth with a sketch.. The Inn is evoked through the use of furniture and lighting with candles and a spectacular candelabra suspended over the action. And in Act three, in the swamps of Louisiana, the stage is bare and the dancers perform in the midst of swirls of dry ice and pools of light.

The score by Jules Massenet contains none of the music from the opera he wrote based on the same story. It was compiled and partially orchestrated by the British composer Leighton Lucas. It is at its most romantic in the intimate sequences with Manon and Des Grieux and is rousingly performed by the Orchestra of the English National Ballet under the baton of Music Director Gavin Sutherland.

All the principals acquit themselves well. Daria Klimentova as Manon has been described as the "company's most classical ballerina". She has particularly expressive hands and arms and is a most controlled performer. Her natural grace and use of *en pointe* is exquisite as she makes it look so effortless. Though clearly one of the best European dancers, Friedemann Vogel as Des Grieux seemed less at ease. However he is suitably athletic and alternately passionate and forlorn as the story twists and turns and he loses and then regains Manon.

The intimacy and poise on display in their various *pas de deux* demonstrates a high level of skill. There is a simply stunning sequence in the swamps of Louisiana when Manon is obviously dying. Friedemann manages to spin Klimentova three times before catching her and she then expires.

Fabian Reimair is no stranger to the role of the manipulative Lescaut. He displays all the corruption and deviousness and is particularly effective when dancing as drunk in Act Two. His comedic timing

was very much enjoyed by the audience and this reviewer. Antony Dowson is an appropriately loathsome and decadent Monsieur GM. His duelling with his rival Des Grieux and the subsequent killing of Lescaut are particular high points of his characterisation, as is his menacing laugh as the curtain falls. Sarah McIlroy proves a feisty and coquettish Mistress of Lescaut and Jane Haworth gives good comic value as the Madame with a taste for the good life.

The seamy *milieu* where courtesans vie for the affections of their patrons is very well portrayed by the *corps de ballet*. The stage pictures are effective with the principals in the foreground and the others in small groups dotted around the stage, doing enough but never so much as to take attention away from the main action.

The three quarter full house at the Palace Theatre appreciated this rare chance to see *Manon* and the skill and artistry on offer as did this reviewer. The English National Ballet performs Manon in Manchester until the end of the week and then moves on to the Liverpool Empire.

Pete Wood [reviewed](#) this production with a different cast at the Bristol Hippodrome

Reviewer: [Andrew Edwards](#)