

British Theatre Guide

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La Fille mal gardée

Choreography by Frederick Ashton

Royal Ballet

Royal Opera House

To 28 April 2010

Frederick Ashton's fifty-year-old *Fille* is still as fresh as a daisy, and as bright and cheerful as the sunflowers lined up against the wall of Osbert Lancaster's pop-up picture book set.

And John Lanchberry's arrangement of Ferdinand Hérold's music is gloriously dreamy, and witty, too - the teasing flute episode is entirely his.

The dancing is superb, the characterization not overdone, the acting and mime flowing naturally from the situations, and the dancers look as if they are enjoying every minute, carrying us along with them.

Carlos Acosta (in fetching floral waistcoat) and Marianela Nuñez - both with fan clubs in the audience - bring an effortless grace, radiance, and relaxed charm and warmth to a simple pastoral romantic comedy that goes back to the late eighteenth century.

Lise loves Colas and he loves her, but her widowed mother Simone wants a more advantageous marriage to the sweet simpleton man-boy Alain (Jonathan Howells is completely endearing with a touch of Harpo Marx about him), reluctant suitor son of wealthy *vigneron* Thomas.

But love always finds a way, and the adults are won over after a good-humoured battle of wills. Even the rejected Alain is content as long as he has his red umbrella, an attachment which gives him much pleasure. Rustic folk and country matters...

The setting is an 'innocent' bucolic realm of maypole dances, young girls in mobcaps and candy coloured dresses, youths in smock tops and straw hats wielding sickles and making hay while the sun shines. And farmyard animals... And a real live fat little Shetland pony to pull the trap...

The opening hens and cockerel number sets the pantomime tone, and Widow Simone's (I almost said Twanky's) clog dance to a catchy tune the disposition of this happy community.

A pleasure to watch, William Tuckett's Widow is just the right side of slapstick pratfalls, delectably comic and very believable at the same time. 'She' rather reminded me of Grayson Perry, the Turner Prize winning potter in his 'Claire' *alter-ego* mode, bien dans sa peau.

La Fille mal gardée (with many echoes from his other works) reaffirms Ashton's genius for dance to a modern day audience. The delicious swoony *pas de deux*, the one-hand lifts, the cheeky *pas de trois* when Lise is supposed to be dancing with Alain but is really dancing with Colas, the heady solos that look so natural yet demand complete control, the intricate footwork, the lyricism (and earthiness), the inventiveness of the ribbon dances (a cat's cradle one result), and the amusing unusual lift by Colas of Lise - perched high on the other side of the huge barn-like door looking in

from an opening at the top, he gently lifts and swings her like a pendulum - many fresh to the dance gasped - whilst Lise's feet flutter with delight.

Ashton the Romantic (and Ugly Sister) raises the spirits of the newcomer and the jaded old-timer with the joy of young love and a fond evocation of the old English music hall. Unforced like breath itself *Fille* entertains, captivates, and involves - at the end the audience were tempted to clap in time with the music.

Acosta and Nuñez, at ease with each other, have set the standard high for the subsequent five couples taking on the loving pigeon pair roles - if only one could see them all. Go and give yourselves a treat - a tonic for a chilly evening.

In rep till 28 April 2010

Reviewer: [Vera Liber](#)