

British Theatre Guide

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Sylvia

Choreography by Frederick Ashton

Royal Ballet

Royal Opera House

(2010)

Who is *Sylvia*, what is she? Why, it is one of Diana's huntress nymphs sworn to eternal chastity, of course, in a glorious three-act ballet as a vehicle for a much-admired dancer at the peak of her talent and fame. It is Frederick Ashton's 1952 paean to his prima ballerina, Margot Fonteyn, a bit of carefree fun, and fine aesthetic as post-war uplift, which, surprisingly, still works today - we're accustomed to fantasy worlds these days.

It is Græco-Roman mythology passed through the Renaissance sieve of Torquato Tasso's 1573 courtly entertainment, transformed in 1876 by Léo Delibes' pretty music, so admired by Tchaikovsky, with its echoes of Wagner and Berlioz.

Searching for a theme for his second full-length ballet, Delibes' score captivated Ashton, and in 1952 it became the context for his love letter to Fonteyn. Not entirely happy with his own creation, over the years Ashton cut it to a two-act then a one-act ballet, and by 1988 little of it was left to perform.

In 2004 the Royal Ballet decided to reconstruct it for his centenary, and the complicated task fell to Christopher Newton, who had already successfully reconstructed Ashton's *Ondine* whilst Ashton was still alive. Towards the end of his life Ashton had wanted to revive *Sylvia*, and improve Act Two.

It has not been an easy task for Newton, as much was long lost or mislaid, and some has had to be recreated "in the spirit of". But credit to him, to Peter Farmer for the recreation of the classical Claude Lorrain inspired original sylvan sets and costumes by the Ironside brothers (father and uncle of agony aunt Virginia Ironside), and to Monica Mason.

A labour of love on a ballet about love - in order to preserve Ashton's style for a young generation - it is a worthy addition to the Royal Ballet's repertoire, a reminder of Ashton's exquisite choreography, which serves the dancers so well. Beautiful solos and *pas de deux*, and garland dances for the peasant corps.

A simple shepherd Aminta loves Sylvia, but she is outraged and shoots him with her arrow. The statue of Eros comes to life and shoots his arrow into her. Orion the hunter (the Bad Turk stage villain in Polovtsian dress - an acrobatic performance from Bennet Gartside), who loves her too, kidnaps her. He wines and dines her in a brief Eastern exotic flavour Act Two (Liam Scarlett and Kevin Emerton two Mikado-esque slaves are the silly light relief), but she, seductive and devious, manages to escape.

In the meantime, Eros, dressed as an old crone (funny flex-point-flex feet), revives Aminta. Love conquers all, even Diana, when Eros reminds her in a vision scene of her youthful infatuation with the sleeping shepherd Endymion. A happy third act Bacchanalian wedding ensues, with demi-gods,

gambolling goats, fauns, nymphs and peasants in elated dance, the stage a whirl of jollity and invention.

A delightful frolic, a battle between Eros and Diana in various guises, in a pastoral idyll framework, it is a gift of a part for a ballerina whose charms and graces win over the gods, dryads, satyrs, and woodland creatures in her dreamy Arcadian dell. Very Marie Antoinette, very Fragonard - nymphs and shepherds, and immortal constellations in the sky controlling the mortals down below.

The onus for this far-fetched ballet is all on the leading couple, but especially on the ballerina. She must dazzle with her footwork, her poise, her musicality, but she must also inject some characterisation into the role. Much is demanded, and it is the measure of the company that the Royal Ballet can field four excellent casts.

I did not manage to see the first or the second casts, but happy to see any of them, each pairing revealing of different aspects of the dance, I saw the third, Sarah Lamb as Sylvia and Federico Bonelli as Aminta. They are a good pairing: he dark to her blond, equal in dance quality, both a pleasure to watch, his partnering attentive and secure (fabulous lifts).

Lamb is a lovely dancer, perky and dazzling in *Elite Syncopations*, and she brings a little of that to this role, especially the pizzicato section. Young and slight, her dancing is light, frisky, assured, pert, witty, and charming, she has a sweet personality (not a natural seductress), but I saw little development of character. This is that extra bit that makes a star. A trifling cavil, her dancing is superb, and the audience loved her (loved them both), but one feels she is capable of more. Playing safe, maybe. For now.

Talking of full-length ballets, the Royal Ballet promises a new full-length ballet next year, end of February - *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon - this will be quite an occasion.

In rep till 1st December 2010

Reviewer: [Vera Liber](#)